Under Law or Under Grace: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community

For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. (Romans 6:14)

For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Galatians 5:14)

In the fall of 1848, the town constable in the hamlet of Putney, Vermont, knocked on the door of John Humphrey Noyes with a warrant for his arrest on charges of adultery. Since 1838, Noyes, a defrocked minister from Yale Theological Seminary, had been gathering around him a coterie of followers, calling themselves the Putney Bible School, who aimed to build a new Jerusalem in expectation of Christ’s immanent reign on earth. The Community shared all property in common, modeling themselves on the communism of the Primitive Church as described on the day of Pentecost in the New Testament.

Noyes’s parents, John and Polly Noyes, were a prominent and prosperous local family, and so Putney put up with their son’s millenial antics. But when Noyes’s theology expanded from the realm of property held in common to include persons held in common, substituting for worldly matrimony a heavenly “marriage feast at which every guest may taste of every dish,” Putney villagers decided enough was enough.

Under the threat of mob violence, Noyes and his fellow communards slipped town and re-established their association at Oneida Creek, in Central New York, where the neighbors were a little less touchy about their unorthodox sexual and marriage theories. Noyes’s brushes with the law would continue from the 1850s through the 1870s, when a concerted group of outraged local clergy, threatening charges of statutory rape and adultery, forced him from his seat (this time he fled to Canada) and effectually closed down the Community in 1879.

More interesting even than Noyes’s persistent flouting of what he called the “law of the world” were his attempts, within the enclosure of his Community, to abolish “law” altogether,
replacing what he derisively called “the spirit of legalism” with the reign of grace, or love. Legal scholar Paul W. Kahn has argued that, while Western culture has traditionally held the rule of law as its highest political ideal, at the same time we “imagine a community beyond law... [in which] love is the measure of action.” By this standard law is not a triumph over chaos but a token of our fallenness, and “Love thy neighbor”—the precept through which Paul insisted in Galatians that “all the law is fulfilled”—is the true sign of a redeemed humanity.1

“All communities must exist either under law or under grace,” Noyes asserted in his History of American Socialisms. The Oneida Community was Noyes’s bold attempt to put into practice the latter: in the heart of the New York wilderness he invented a space where, for 32 fragile years, love would strive to supplant law. This could happen only because Noyes redefined the very boundaries of personhood as traditionally understood by law. A person, before belonging to him or herself, belonged to the common body of Christ and only fulfilled the true requirements of personhood in this capacity. In the universal “communism of love” imagined by Noyes, one did not just love one’s neighbor; one became one’s neighbor in Christ, thus obviating the need for law as a mediator between persons.

Noyes was set on the path of supplanting law by love early in his religious career, while a divinity student at Yale in 1833. There he was attracted to the doctrine of Perfectionism, an offshoot of John Wesley's theology in “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection” that emphasized sanctifying grace over obedience to the external law. Noyes underwent a conversion experience in which he understood that God’s grace was a gift available to all, and that to accept it into one’s heart was to become “perfect,” no longer subject to the law in the literal sense of the term. Upon lying in bed on the night of February 23, 1833, Noyes received a new baptism of the spirit: “a stream of eternal love gushed through [his] heart” and he knew, in a flash, that his heart had been made clean.

The “polluted images” that had formerly “blast[ed] his endeavors after holiness,” trapping him in a compulsively legal faith, had been washed away once and for all.2

Some of Noyes’s fellow Perfectionists took this emancipation to the extreme, tempting themselves to sexual license as proof that they were beyond law. In the beginning, Noyes strictly condemned these practices, and insisted that the marriage law had to hold sway until God’s kingdom was resumed on earth. In his Confession of Religious Experience, Noyes recounts how he and a fellow Perfectionist, Simon Lovett, set out to forge links with other Perfectionist converts in New England in the winter of 1835. Noyes and Lovett stopped in Brimfield, Massachusetts, where Noyes was immediately struck by the disconcertingly loose manners of the group of handsome young Perfectionist women gathered there, who freely exchanged kisses and terms of endearment with their male co-religionists. Sitting next to a beauty named Hannah one evening, Noyes received an unexpected kiss from the admiring girl as they parted for bed. Noyes panicked at this carnal invitation and, without communicating his intentions to anyone, abandoned ship the next morning and “took a bee-line on foot through snow and cold—below zero—to Putney, sixty miles distant.”3

Noyes had, indeed, gotten off a sinking ship just in time. A few nights later, the Perfectionist fervor in Brimfield assumed a dramatic form when Mary Lincoln and Maria Brown, seeking to test their perfection, crept into Simon Lovett’s bedroom where in the end the flesh triumphed over the spirit. Becoming hysterical at the ensuing scandal (known locally as the “Brimfield Bundling”), Mary Lincoln and another Perfectionist, Flavilla Howard, had a vision that God was about to destroy the town with fire from heaven. Racing through mud and rain to the peak of a nearby mountain, tearing off their clothes in ecstatic frenzy as they ran, they prayed that the “avenging bolts might be stayed” and, as a result, claimed to have saved the town of Brimfield from divine destruction.4

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3 George Wallingford Noyes, Religious Experience, 199.
4 Ibid., 198.
But if Noyes, early on in his career, critiqued the fanatical version of Perfectionism running riot at Brimfield, replete with rainstorms, hellfire and streaking women, he had changed his tune by the time he established the Oneida Community in 1848. “God is love,” says the Gospel of John, and Paul follows it up by declaring, in his Letter to the Corinthians, that “we, though many, are one body in Christ.” Saint Paul repeatedly refers to the union of God and his Church through Christ as a marriage. Noyes’s theology was simply Saint Paul taken to his logical, if perverse, conclusion: sexual union was not just a metaphor, but a practical way for souls to bind themselves to one another in the common medium of Christ’s body. Noyes’s theological studies led him to the conclusion that God had never intended us to exclude *eros* as a viable channel for a loving union with the Godhead but that, on the contrary, the sexual organs were the “first and best channel of the life and love of God.”

Further, and perhaps more radically, Noyes insisted that *eros* could be universalized every bit as much as *agape*. “I call a certain woman my wife. She is yours, she is Christ’s, and in him she is the bride of all saints. She is now in the hands of a stranger, and according to my promise to her I rejoice,” Noyes wrote in an 1837 letter working out the details of his new sexual theory. The marriage law which held sway in the world worked to constrict and diminish love, which in its fullness and by its very nature was expansive and rippled out in ever more inclusive circles. Selfishness—the insistence on a self (or a pair of selves) apart from God and the Church—was for Noyes the root of all alienation from God, and what had to be fought in order to win a full state of perfection. By dissolving the self into Christ, Christians would become one body and the need for law would wither on the vine.

Noyes grounded his system in the pseudo-scientific claim that God, Christ, and humans were connected through the flow of a divine electric love-fluid permeating the Church—a belief he

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borrowed rather loosely from contemporary scientific investigations into the links between biology and electricity. Since 1780 when Luigi Galvani had first made an amputated frog’s leg jump by connecting it to the pole of a battery (and his nephew had, even more spectacularly, if perhaps less tastefully, made the corpse of an executed convict flinch by the same method), the mysterious link between electricity and animal energy, or what was called “animal magnetism,” became a matter of intense debate for scientists and the literate public. Some scientists, seeking an animating force uniting the cosmos, were quick to see in electricity a life-force pulsing throughout creation, and whose vitality and balance was essential to maintaining the body’s health. “The human system may be looked upon as a [battery], with positive and negative polarity,” comments one medical treatise from 1863, chalking disease up to a disturbance in the life-force that needed to be re-equilibrated. Artificial electricity—the application to the body of magnets or electric shocks—was capable of re-channeling, re-organizing, and even augmenting the human life-force.  

Borrowing from these theories, Noyes argued that Christ possessed an “invisible energy, a battery of nervous power,” and asserted that “the healing power of Jesus Christ was a fluid which passed from him, as electricity passes from the machine that generates it.” “Our life can become charged with the life of Christ, till it is magnetic like his life,” Noyes later elaborated. Energy begat energy, according to Noyes, and in the fullness of time, when God’s Kingdom was fully extended to earth, each individual life would be enfolded within every other, and the whole of human life enfolded into God and Christ, in kind of nesting-doll configuration forming “one glowing sphere” and a battery of inconceivable power.  

The highest form of spiritual interchange in the resurrected state was sexual intercourse.

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7 E.J. Fraser, Medical Electricity: A Treatise on the Nature of Electricity in Health and Disease (Chicago: S. Halsey, 1863), 11.
interlocked contact when freed from the artificial restrictions of the worldly fashion chaining one man to one woman. The union of male and female would fold into the original God-Jesus battery, intensifying its effect. Thus fused into one gigantic divine sex battery, humans could accumulate enough electrical force to overcome death itself, according to Noyes’s theory: “Victory over death will be the result of an action of an extensive battery of this kind,” he theorized.\(^9\)

But in order for the battery to function properly and to achieve life everlasting, there could be no obstruction to the free flow of divine energy throughout the electrical network of the assembled Church. Noyes was particularly fond of digestion metaphors in picturing for his followers how they needed to flush out egotism and selfishness in order to assimilate themselves to God and usher in the reign of love rather than law. Just as the body eats and drinks to sustain itself, so the spirit, in its intercourse with others, “imbibe[s] spirit; and it shows itself in the blood—in the spiritual humors, so to speak,” Noyes suggests. Noyes’s notion of spiritual intercourse extended, of course, to sexual intercourse, and he once complained after a failed amorous encounter with one of his favorite lovers that she had no doubt been sleeping with “indigestible men,” causing a blockage in her magnetism. “The method by which we approach God, and become assimilated to him, may be illustrated by the process of digestion,” suggests a rather sententious 1867 article in the Community newspaper. Just as we take food in its “crude and perhaps hard state” and turn it into a “pulp” so that it may be circulated throughout the organism, so we must soften ourselves in order to become part of the body of Christ. The Oneidans worked hard at becoming pulp in the divine stomach, and “softness of heart” was an accolade of the highest kind.\(^10\)

Throwing all of one’s worldly belongings into a communal pot was a relatively easy sacrifice when it came to softening oneself for digestion by the communal body. But attaining “communism of heart”—in other words, love which “brings no demands and leaves no claim,” as one member

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\(^9\) John Humphrey Noyes, *Bible Communism*, 44.

described it—was another matter entirely. Sexual possessiveness, it seems, was particularly entrenched in the human heart. Special attachments to individual lovers, or what Oneidans called “sticky love,” gummed up the circulatory works of the community body by obtruding a toxic, indigestible ego (or pair of egos) into the stream of universal love.\(^\text{11}\)

Making the self permeable to the other, and expunging sticky love, was in no way a natural process, as the Oneidans were the first to admit. In an oddly Calvinist strain, the Oneidans believed that man in the "state of nature" was prey to the devil, to un-tempered natural laws of lust and depravity, and that nature had to be rigorously harnessed and channeled in order to reach Godly perfection. Desire, Noyes opined, and with it acquisitiveness, was a general law of nature. All the "lower attractions"—chemical attraction, gravitation—exhibited “the same craving element... the tendency to seize and appropriate to themselves other things,” and so it was with man in the natural state. Noyes sought to institute a state where humans could be beyond law—but this did not mean they did not constantly have to struggle against nature, whose laws (like the acquisitiveness of gravity and chemical attraction) were manifestly imperfect. Unlike the animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds, man had self-restraint to civilize brute nature—this was the stamp of God in him-- and to free oneself from nature’s laws required a Herculean effort.

Far from giving themselves over to instinct, or what might be considered the “laws” governing human behavior in a state of nature, Oneidans liked to compare themselves to one of the most spectacular recent examples of the industrial taming of nature: the steam engine. Well-regulated eros, claimed an 1869 blurb in *The Circular*, took the erratic force of “steam” (unregulated, “sticky” love) and turned it to efficient use. “By confining and controlling steam,” the author writes airily, “it is made to do a great many things, and is of incalculably more benefit to mankind, than when allowed to sing naturally through the nose of grandmother’s tea-kettle.”\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{11}\) Alfred Barron to Beulah Hendee, October 5, 1879. Oneida Community Collection Box 48.
\(^\text{12}\) *The Circular*, 1869.
Yet such self-restraint was not the same thing as law or legalism, according to Noyes. He came up with a remarkable chemical metaphor for the difference between a state of society in which law ruled relations between men and one in which love, or grace, held sway. He compared humans to an acid with a “voracious appetite for all organic substances, and [that] will destroy and consume whatever it can get at.” Left in its natural state, man had precisely such an unregulated appetite, laying claim to and selfishly grasping whatever it came into contact with (including, of course, sexual objects—which was always at the center of Noyes’s attention). Law was akin to placing the acid in a glass vial that would prevent it from destroying everything around it—but would not change its internal properties. Man must develop, within himself, and not by means of external barriers, the “conscience and discretion that will prevent its acting anywhere except where it is wanted and ought to act.” Such self-restraint was the only true path to freedom from law.  

In lieu of law, Oneidans instituted a series of social practices that tied members to a regimen of ruthless introspection and personal discipline. Mutual criticism—by which Oneida Community members appeared before a committee (usually at their own request) to listen, impartially and in silence, to a dissection of their character flaws—was Oneida’s attempt to neutralize, without the medium of glass vials, the acidity of its members.

The notes on the occasion of a criticism of James B. Herrick, in 1866, are particularly illustrative of the aims of mutual criticism. Herrick was living partly in the Community at the time of the criticism and partly in New York City, with his wife and five children, who, despite his best attempts at persuasion, remained unconvinced of Noyes’s mission. Noyes himself opened the session with the caveat that the fact that Herrick spent so much time outside of the Community, compounded by “the amount of worldlings he has to contend with,” was assumed to entail a certain

13 “Good and Bad Attractions,” The Circular, Volume 11: 52 (December 21, 1874).
unavoidable contamination. The task of the Community was to cooperate with God in purifying him of society's dross through a dose of brisk critical cleansing.¹⁴

Mr. Herrick was, in some respects, a “beautiful member of Christ’s body,” as two panelists kindly observed. However, the body of Christ was being crippled in Mr. Herrick by the “great marriage principality,” or in other words, his sticky ties to his wife. Herrick’s selfish refusal to sacrifice himself wholly to the Community was identified as his principal shortcoming (except for one rather cranky panel member who kept emphasizing Herrick’s tendency to tell boring anecdotes as his chief social sin). “There is a part of you that is not communized,” Noyes chides, “that is not obedient to the Community Spirit.” Mutual criticism sought, precisely, to ferret out the secret recesses of both body and soul that remained outside of the healthy circulatory loop of the larger Community, dissolving every particle of the self into the living unity of the whole.¹⁵

To “communize the self,” to borrow Noyes’s phrase, was the extraordinary task Oneidan men and women set for themselves. Two women whose letters to one another record the challenges of communizing the self—and the painful process of eradicating sticky love—were Beulah Hendee and Annie Hatch. Over the course of their one-year correspondence, beginning in the fall of 1878, Beulah would have no fewer than four rotating lovers, one of whom, James W. Towner, she shared with Annie. The letters between the two women, along with Beulah’s letters to two of her paramours, reveal the Oneidans’ continual striving to imagine themselves not as separate individuals but as unified members of Christ’s body. Their intercourse with one another—both textual and sexual—aimed to avoid the snare of exclusive pairings and keep the divine love fluid circulating throughout the whole. By “softening,” “melting,” and “enlarging” their hearts in the common medium of Christ, the rigid legal boundaries separating self and other would dissolve, and the need for law would vanish.

¹⁴ Oneida Community Collection, Mutual Criticism folder, Box 16.
¹⁵ Ibid.
Beulah Foster Hendee, born in Lexington, New York on February 18th, 1847, was a young woman decidedly alone in the world. Her mother had died in giving birth to her and her father had, in turn, abandoned her. She had been brought up by a family named Hendee, who reportedly mistreated her; after that, she moved in with her aunt, Candace Bushnell. Beulah was an attractive, delicate-looking young woman, with clear, sad eyes, a straight nose, and a pouty mouth that had just the faintest hint of an under-bite. Those acquainted with the facts of her love-starved youth could be forgiven for detecting a remoteness in the girl's portrait, a sadness in the wispy, close-cropped hair and dark ruffled dress. Nor is it surprising, given her lack of strong family ties, that when her Aunt Bushnell, a fervent Perfectionist convert, urged her to join the Oneida Community in 1864 when she was seventeen years old, she readily consented.

Beulah found in Annie Hatch a fast friend and confidante. Annie's portrait shows a woman more robust than the fragile Beulah, with handsomely chiseled cheekbones, a confident gaze, and the hint of a smile playing over her lips. A community "lifer" (she had been brought to Oneida with her family at the age of five) and older than her friend by five years, Annie undoubtedly helped the young Beulah negotiate the daunting complexities of the Oneidan sexual system, which they called Complex Marriage. In August of 1878, Annie Hatch left Oneida to live for a time at the branch commune of Wallingford Community. Annie's departure left Beulah bereft and Dorothea—Beulah's two-year-old daughter—quizzical as to where "Aunt Annie" could have disappeared: "Where is Annie... All gone..." writes Beulah to her departed confidante on August 3rd, mimicking the infantine logic of her child. "'Should think you would feel bereft without your Pythias– or Damon–whichever one she was,'” quipped one of Beulah's friends upon Annie's departure. "I do," the chagrined Beulah replied. 16

Annie's coach to Wallingford most likely carried another passenger Beulah was sad to see go: John Sears, an earnest machinist who was being sent to Wallingford to help out with the spoon

16 Hendee to Hatch, August 3rd 1878. Box 48.
manufacturing business, and who had been Beulah’s lover for the past two years. If one is able to read between the lines of the ever-encrypted references to sex in the Oneida letters, Beulah and John had begun their affair several years earlier at the Community’s vacation beach house in Connecticut, nicknamed Cozycot. Beulah had a rustic stone seat in the environs of the summer house where she liked to sit and write. One balmy June day, as she shared her special spot with John, she picked a rose and placed it in his notebook as a token of her affection for him, and the romance blossomed. A note from John upon his arrival in Wallingford, on October 9th 1878, registered the loss he felt on leaving Beulah back in Oneida, noting that he “misses [her] ever and ever so much.”  

But Beulah had, perhaps without even knowing it, already turned her sights elsewhere. Before Annie and John’s departure, both Beulah and Annie had undertaken to follow a course of French lessons with James W. Towner, a dashing newcomer to the Community. “I ran away from the Children’s House this afternoon long enough to recite my first French lesson,” Beulah reported to Annie in her letter of August 15th. “As a friend I have ceased to be afraid of him, but as a teacher I stand somewhat in awe of him.” Beulah was right to be intimidated by Mr. Towner. Originally from Willsboro, New York, Towner bounced around from state to state before finally landing in Oneida in 1874. His impressive if somewhat eclectic resume included studying theology in Ohio; passing the bar exam in Iowa, losing sight in one eye in the Civil War as a soldier for the Union army; and dabbling in the Berlin Heights free-love experiment. His portrait reveals a man with a close-cropped beard staring directly into the camera—no demure three-quarter angle for him— with searing blue eyes of an almost uncomfortable intensity. His lofty white forehead would have denoted, in the phrenological idiom of the time, a strong intellectual tendency. Indeed, his was a philosopher’s mind, which he put to work writing a series of articles for the Oneida Circular in 1875, picking quarrels with the skeptical philosophy of Hume and Locke and arguing for the

17 John Sears to Hendee, October 9th 1878. Box 73.
precedence of belief over reason. He had, in other words, the kind of worldly experience, authority and gravitas that, in a teacher, inspires a student's awe.\(^\text{18}\)

Annie and Beulah quipped back and forth in their August letters about their relationship to “Jacques,” as they agreed conspiratorially to refer to their French teacher: “No one else knows who it is but we two,” Beulah all but whispered to her friend. The student-teacher relationship between Towner and the two ladies crackled with sexual tension, as Beulah used her letters to Annie to plug all three of them into a free-flowing triangular love-circuit where pairs formed and dissolved at the turn of a phrase. “Mr. Towner says I may tell you anything I like from him,” Beulah informed Annie in one of her near-daily epistles, “but I told him I should be careful considering that he is coming [to Wallingford] before long and might possibly inveigle you into showing him what I had written.” Invoking the titillating secrets women share in their private correspondence, Beulah tempted “Jacques” to think of himself as a prized object of their daily gossip, all the while suggesting she had secret (possibly erotic) thoughts about him she did not want him to know. At the same time as she flirts with Jacques, however, Beulah hints at a possible romantic liaison between Annie and her French tutor: what would “inveigle” Annie to share Beulah’s letters with him, if not a shift in allegiance away from her female confidante and co-conspirator, and toward a male lover? Beulah was by turns Jacques’s would-be lover, his matchmaker, and his teasing adversary in a game where eros could move in many different directions at once.

In one particularly deft tout-de-force, Beulah triangulated her relationship with her tutor and best friend so that, by turns, she coupled herself with first Jacques, then Annie, then whipped around and neatly paired the two of them off together. Noyes himself couldn’t have asked for any more efficient “communism of love” than Beulah’s skillful manipulation of the erotic energy pulsing through this love triangle. Reporting a conversation she had had with Jacques, Beulah wrote: “I said [to him] ‘Annie won’t have to be drilled in pronouncing,’ but he said ‘Wait till I get there and see’—

\(^{18}\) Hendee to Hatch, August 10, 1878. Box 48.
So you had better look out, and be thankful that you have me to warn you.” By invoking Annie’s superior linguistic talents, Beulah flirted with her tutor and set up an unspoken sexual competition for Jacques’s attentions between the two women. But at the same time, she flaunted her allegiance to Annie in a pact against Jacques, assuring her of her position as a helpful ally and “spy” in the ever-shifting triangle. Finally, by reporting to Annie that Jacques is thinking (sternly) about his upcoming “lesson” with her, Beulah acted as a coy go-between in Jacques and Annie’s as-yet-unconsummated relationship. “Jacques has been here playing Cribbage. I mean to ask him to carry the cribbage board when he goes and teach you the game,” Beulah wrote to Annie; Beulah could have lit upon no more apt metaphor for their playful three-way sharing of affections.

By Beulah’s epistle of September 4th, the relationship with Jacques had flowered and, presumably, had culminated in an “interview” (the Oneidan euphemism for sex) between teacher and student. “Jacques will call you his best pupil I know, especially after he has been down there to attend to you,” Beulah wrote to Annie, and one detects—beneath the flattery and playful matchmaking—an unconscious anxiety about Jacques’s impending departure and a fear that Jacques may, indeed, find Annie a “better pupil,” sexually speaking. As if sensing the unconsummated note of competition she had injected into the relationship, Beulah immediately reversed herself and urged Annie to spend a weekend with Jacques at Cozicot, the Community’s Connecticut summer house: “To have him go to Cozicot with you would be next to going there with him myself,” she confided. In a gesture typical of the communists’ romantic dealings with one another, Beulah generously extended her relationship with Jacques to Annie, picturing herself and her friend as interchangeable units of Christ’s body. Annie’s sexual experience with Jacques would flow into and amplify Beulah’s own love for him, as well as her love for Annie, folding all three into the glowing love-sphere John Humphrey Noyes imagined as the very shape of heaven.

Neither same-sex eros, it should be noted, nor its possible consummation, ever arises in the
Community literature—presumably because John Humphrey Noyes’s theory of magnetic male and female poles rendered such an arrangement anatomically as well as theologically unthinkable. Nonetheless, there is a way in which the universalization of *eros* as the key tenet of Community doctrine lent all relationships—sexually consummated or not—an aura of romance and longing. If Annie could work as a bridge uniting Jacques and Beulah erotically, might not Jacques work as a similar bridge to facilitate a vicarious erotic experience between the two women?

“I have all at once become unappeasably hungry for you, and what am I to do?” Beulah wrote in one plaintive missive to her friend. “Why, I feel like a lover to you—and yet you are so far away.” And if Jacques’ letters to Annie troubled Beulah, it was not because they diverted his attention from her, but because his letters lessened her own importance in the economy of Annie’s affections: “I told him yesterday that if you wrote to him more than you did to me that I should be jealous. ‘Why no you won’t’ said he—‘Why yes I shall,’ said I—I shall be jealous about you, you know, not him.” The day after Annie’s departure for Wallingford, Beulah had compared herself to Adam having woken absent one rib. Beulah felt Annie’s absence as an almost corporal loss; one wonders whether, through the shared medium of Jacques’ body, she might not have reclaimed—at least in imagination—her lost part. Annie, too, felt a special bond with Beulah. “I had one of the pleasantest dreams about you Tuesday night,” she scribbled to her friend. “I thought we saw each other, and we rushed into each other’s arms and hugged each other real hard... It left a very pleasant experience in my mind.”

The week of September 15th Jacques took his leave for Wallingford and, with her lover safely ensconced with her friend in Connecticut, Beulah detected a change in Annie’s letters, an uptick in her mood. “I can see from your letters that your heart is getting comfort and peace. You will find the ‘true pitch’ about love I’m sure,” she wrote encouragingly. The “true pitch” is probably a reference to Noyes’s affection for musical metaphors in speaking about getting into the right

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20 Hendee to Hatch, November 24, 1878; Hatch to Hendee, December 12, 1878.
relationship with God. “We are like a piano with many strings sounding high and low,” Noyes once wrote, and “the question is how to keep our attention on the key note [of] the voice of God in the heart.” The question of what—or who—is affording Annie this sudden spiritual guidance in matters of love was, however, left untouched between the two women.21

But this state of erotic equilibrium, where attractions were circulated equally among all three points of the triangle, was not to last. By the end of October, Jacques was back at the Oneida Community, and Beulah was now under an interdiction from seeing him. While we don’t know the details of the decision, Annie’s letter to Beulah of October 25th indicated that Beulah had been judged “ensnared” in sticky love—as well as that Jacques had been judged “proud” and possessive and in need of learning more “about himself and Community principles” before he could appropriately associate with Beulah again. Their exclusive attachment to one another had hardened Jacque’s heart, making it an indigestible morsel that could not be properly broken up and circulated in the Community bloodstream. “He thinks he is all right, but God can show him and melt his heart,” Beulah wrote hopefully. Beulah recognized that she, too, had ceased to “set the Lord always before her,” as the Psalmist recommended, and had given in to idolatrous love: “This has been different from any experience I ever had in my life,” she confessed to Annie. “I had such confidence in JWT that I gave him my heart without reserve.”

As would often happen in cases of sticky love injunctions, John Humphrey Noyes invited Beulah into his own sexual orbit in order to unblock her obstructed magnetism and help her to find love’s “true pitch.” On New Year’s day they shared an oyster stew together and, Beulah confided to Annie, “New Years I celebrated with him another way—I need not tell you how.” The renewed magnetic sexual contact with Noyes seemed to be doing the trick of unsticking Beulah’s heart. “It is a matter of great thankfulness to me in this trial that my heart is so warm and loving toward JHN,” Beulah wrote to Annie. “He feels like a lover to me; and I had a sense yesterday that that is just the

way he feels toward God. It is a feeling no different from that we have toward our dearest lovers, only far more intense. When I get that in my heart toward God I shan't have any more trouble about love. I shall think first of God, then will come perfect liberty,” she penned hopefully. John Humphrey may well have given Beulah the advice he had, one year earlier, dispensed to his niece Tirzah Miller, when he counseled her that she must “let her heart out to someone, and then take it in again instantly at the word of command, just as the dancers obey the call of the manager.”

Meanwhile, criss-crossing in the mail with Beulah and Annie’s missives, John Sears and Beulah were also in close epistolary contact. Community members referred to sexual relationships by the general term of “experience,” encompassing all that this word connotes of learning and trial, of failure and progress, insofar as mastering special love was critical training for coming into a right relationship with God and enshrining grace rather than law in the heart. In his letters John admitted to missing Beulah, but not to being unhappy, as God had “arranged our experience just before I came here, and...[it] has made me more softhearted and humble than any experience I ever had before, and I shall have to thank God and you for it.” Relationships were intended, at their best, to lead members to “softheartedness,” by which the communards meant a lack of stubborn egoism, cheerful subordination of the self to the spirit of community and God. Only by “melting” their hearts and diluting their love in the medium of Christ could the Oneidans escape the death-dealing grip of law.

Beulah reported her sexual rapprochement with “Father” Noyes to John and, just as Beulah had tried to have a soft heart towards Jacques and Annie—viewing all three as connected in an ever-expanding chain of love—so John expressed an expanded sense of fellowship for both Beulah and Father Noyes through their sexual union. “I am very thankful that you have got so near Father Noyes and it does my heart good to have you write about him, for it draws me nearer to him, and makes me feel thankful and happy. How I should like to see him: I would give him a good hug and

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22 Hendee to Hatch, November 19th, 1878; Hendee to Hatch, January 6th, 1879.
23 Sears to Hendee, October 9th, 1878.
kiss and it would do me ever so much good.” The medium of Beulah’s love brought him into closer connection and brotherhood with the Community at large, and in particular with Father Noyes: “I do not have any fears but that you will love me enough and I do want you to love me ever so much, for I do you; and I love Father too. I am glad that he has fallen in love with you so that he can sympathize with me, for I have fallen in love with you too.” John and “Father” Noyes’s shared love of Beulah brought them into a vibrating chord of sympathy with one another, an expanded fellowship in which, once again, love was equally distributed between the three points of the erotic triangle. 24

Ironically, given Beulah’s individual struggles against special love at this time, it was precisely the lesson of universal love, true “communism of heart,” that Annie had learned in the course of her sexual rapport with Jacques during September and October. For on December 12th, the pregnant silence between the two women on the question of Jacques was broken, as Annie confided to Beulah her “experience” with the charismatic French tutor. During the two months that he had lived at Wallingford, Jacques had taught Annie the secret of unselfish love, how to channel the potentially unsettling—and sticky—power of eros into the expanded peace of agape: “I do not prize his friendship so much for the mere pleasure of loving and being loved... but for the effect it has had of awakening my heart anew to Communistic love,” Annie explained in her letter. “When he came here, my heart was shut up and I felt as though I never wanted anything more to do with men sexually—and it was all I could do to be even friendly to them.” Jacques slowly “let me feel that I had a heart and gave me new courage to let it be warmed and melted,” such that, by the time he left, Annie found herself truly in love with him. “But the best thing was, that I found my heart warming and enlarging toward all the brothers here—and my heart has been filled with a desire to seek unselfishly to please those around me, even at the sacrifice of my own tastes and inclination. I feel that God has the first love of my heart.” Annie’s experience with Jacques led her to re-communize herself, to melt her stony, indigestible heart and put it back into circulation within the life-blood of

24 Sears to Hendee, February 28th, 1879.
the Community. 25

Thanking Beulah for her assurances that she loved her unconditionally, Annie passionately defended their relationship against the incursions of “man-love,” or the sexual love she had learned to use as a vehicle for approaching God and expanded fellowship in Christ’s body: “I am glad you wrote just how you felt, and am grateful to you for your deep, sincere love for me. That certainly is more gratifying to me than to know that any man loves me, and be assured that Jacques or any other man shall not separate our hearts… If you could only see me you would know that I should be faithful. It seems cruel to have love of man come in and separate two women—and God helping me, it shall never be.” Tired, perhaps, of the ceaseless emotional ups and downs of her relationships with male lovers, Annie pledged her loyalty to Beulah as an anchor whose love would hold her fast. “Do you know,” she would write reflectively to her friend a few years later, “and it is not flattery nor imagination, that you seem nearer to my heart than anyone on earth, and I think I love you more than anyone else?” 26

By January of 1879, in addition to her sexual rapprochement with John Humphrey Noyes, Beulah was engaged in a budding romance with Alfred Barron, the Community horticulturalist. Having learned to place God at the center of her affections, she pledged to Annie that, “I don’t think Alfred will take me away from John [Sears],” who was planning a return to Oneida from Wallingford. “Alfred said the other day that he would make me all happy,” Beulah confided, “so that John could enjoy me when he came back.” 27 The triangles may have shifted—from Beulah/Annie/Jacques, to Beulah/Noyes/John, to Beulah/John/Alfred—but the essential goal was the same. Alfred would extend his generosity to John, and find increased fellowship with him, through the medium of Beulah’s body and spirit, just as Annie and Beulah had found in Jacques’s body and spirit a bridge, and not a barrier, to their communion.

25 Hatch to Hendee, December 12, 1878.
26 Ibid.
27 Hendee to Hatch, January 23rd, 1879.
Communism of love would not last. One night in early June of 1879, under the pressure of internal dissension (James W. Towner had drummed up an anti-Noyes faction within the Community ranks), as well as external threats of legal prosecution, John Humphrey Noyes escaped to Canada; one year later, the Community had been dissolved into a joint-stock company. Before its demise, Towner’s party—whom Noyes tagged derisively as a faction of “individual sovereigns”—would seek to introduce to a democratic constitution into the Community. But as Noyes’s right-hand man in the battle against the individual sovereigns, Frank Wayland-Smith, noted in an article for the *Circular*, communism could never be mixed with rights-based, or “legal,” individualism. Communism could not work under law, but only if its members agreed to dissolve themselves in the higher principle of love, which obviated the very notion of the classical liberal self. As Wayland-Smith wrote, communist associations without religion attempted to legislate unity among their members, while “at the same time retaining the bulk of the selfish ownerships they before possessed, and with no higher recognized principle to which they can appeal than the rules of their constitution.” 28 Only when love trumped law could we hope for a redeemed humanity.

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