

ONEIDA COMMUNITY: SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH SELF-DOMINION

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During the first months of 1848, in Oneida County, not far from lake Oneida, between the towns of Syracuse and Utica, a strange community of perfectionists from nearby Vermont began to gather on land belonging to a rich farmer. Joined by numerous local farmers, they soon settled down; within a year the community grew to about one hundred members all devoted to God, to their patriarch, to agamy and to common ownership. John Humphrey Noyes, the founder of Oneida Community wrote:

The revivalists had for their great idea the regeneration of the soul. The great idea of socialists was the regeneration of society, which is the soul environment... These two ideas, which in modern times are so wide apart, were present together in original Christianity¹.

The combination of the millenarist faith of his time and modern rationalism (in particular Fourier) inspired Noyes to begin his utopian experiment.

From the beginning the aim of Oneida was to create an earthly paradise according to the presumed model of the early Christians of the Primitive Church. The first historical institution which Noyes reexamined was monogamous marriage, which he believed to be contraddictory to the teachings of the Bible and the Gospel:

The sin system, the marriage system, the work system and the death system are all one and must be abolished together. Holiness, free love, association in labor and immortality constitute the chain of redemption, and must come together in their true order².

It was thus obligatory for new members of the community to accept the principles of complex marriage, which collectivises, both spiritually and physically, relationships of affection.

¹ J.H. Noyes, *History of American Socialism*. Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincot & Co., 1870, 27.

² *Bible Communism: A Compilation from the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and Its Branches; Presenting, in Connection with their History, a Summary View of their Religious and Social Theories*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Office of the Circular, 1853, 48.

From the very inception of the community, complex marriage represented its socio-political foundation. The success of this system was the proof and the confirmation of the social and spiritual renaissance of community members.

Sexual relations only took place with collective approval, and to avoid the danger of "sentimental degeneration", partners were changed several times in a week. So-called male continence whereby orgasm was rigorously withheld, was of considerable ideological importance. Thus sexual relations were abstracted from the idea of procreation and became a sort of intimate conversation. The capacity of self-denial was supported by the rule of ascending fellowship, whereby each member of the community had always to refer to others who either were older, or had more experience and wisdom than themselves.

Daily life was carefully organised from morning till night in all its aspects – from work to recreation to meal times to sex and to individual meditation. As in the phalansteries devised by Fourier, community members lived in a large building called Mansion House, divided into wings, and duties were rotated according to individual inclinations and desires.

The most important event was the collective community discussion of spiritual teaching, general problems and anti-social behaviour, which took place during the evening meetings of mutual criticism. With the exception of Noyes, everybody had to undergo these sessions in an attempt to continuously improve consciousness and eradicate faults. So self-dominion was the constant goal, with the « chosen self » as the ideal form of self-expression. Internal and collective harmony had to be fostered within the context not only of a nascent and developing community, but also within that of the wider economic context of the United States.

Self-control and « rational » reciprocal affection were maintained despite obstacles caused by individual particularities such as age, health, physical attraction etc., and of those caused by the problems of the society in the process of industrialization which was beginning to assume classic nineteenth century values³.

³ J.H. Noyes was born in Putney (Vt.) and started his religious career in 1831. He studied at Andover and Yale, where he was influenced by the revivalist ideals of some of his professors (all members of the reforming school of New Haven). Convinced that permanent liberation from sin had to be the first step of man toward eternal salvation, Noyes differed from his teachers in sustaining that history was cyclical and that the Second Coming of Christ coincided with the destruction of Jerusalem. The new evangelists' task was to be the foundation of a new Church according to the pattern of the Primitive one. Thus, returning to the conditions for a third coming, the Gentiles would reach the religious maturity that once the Jews had owned. Creation of a perfect world had thus to fit into the Christian era as part of a procedure which would lead the Gentiles to Universal Judgment. Noyes declared himself free from sin on 20th-2-34, three months later he was expelled by Yale and was barred from becoming a clergyman. He lived in New York for a short time where he met Garrison and Finney, and published a magazine of social and religious problems called « The Witness ». In 1838 he got

Between 1848 and 1858, the community, which had been exclusively agricultural, became increasingly commercial, to the point of acquiring an industrial orientation.

Community systems of production benefitted from the general change in society at large in the direction of industrialisation; methods were continuously improved until, by the late '60's and the '70's, a coherent and efficient workforce had been established, much as one may expect from any expanding economic community. This progress was closely tied to the practice of mutual criticism as we shall see by reconstructing three fundamental moments in the life of the community in the years 1848-49, 1856 and 1863, which mark respectively the foundation, the start of manufacturing activities and the use of an external workforce. During these years, day by day control of all aspects of the private and public lives of community members was systematically intensified through mutual criticism.

Having accepted community rules an individual had to overcome all « willful » individualism by learning to control all emotions, including those with biological or « instinctual » bases which, in the case of the man, involved repressing orgasm, and in that of the woman, all feelings of maternity⁴.

In a community devoted to communal well-being, mutual criticism provided the reins whereby passions were kept in check. Nordhoff, a perceptive observer, noted:

If I should add that the predominant impression made upon me was that it was a common-place company, I might give offense; but, after all, what else but this could be the expression of people whose lives are removed from need, and narrowly bounded by their community; whose religious theory calls for no internal struggles, and, once within the community, very little self-denial; who are well-fed and sufficiently amused, and not overworked and have no future to fear? The greater passions are not stirred in such a life. If these are once thoroughly awakened, the individual leaves the community⁵.

married and went back to Putney. Here, with his wife, some relatives and a few close friends, he began his first community experiment. Persuaded by local clergy (both congregationalist and methodist), the community escaped to Oneida where they were invited by a rich disciples of Noyes. Cfr. R.A. Parker, *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community*. Porcupine Press, Philadelphia, 1972, 3-142.

⁴ It is interesting to see Kern's point of view about male continence: « On one level it represented autonomy for the male, in that his sexual climax was overmastered by his own will. On another level it represented submission to the strictly animal nature of sexuality (which Noyes associated with women), in the form of the female orgasm. Although from one point of view a very significant gain in erotic freedom for women, such a system represents, viewed more intensively, an even more insidious dehumanization of women as sex objects ». Cfr. L.J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias: the Shakers, the Mormons and the Oneida Community*. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1981, 277.

⁵ C. Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States; from Personal Visit and Observation: Including Detailed Accounts of the Economists, Zoarites, Shakers, the Amana, Oneida, Bethel, Aurora, Icarian, and Other Existing Societies, Their Religious Creeds, Social Practices, Numbers, Industries, and Present Condition*. Harper & Brothers, New York, 1875, 288.

Though new as a political institution, mutual criticism had already a long tradition as a religious practice of which Noyes had had experience at Andover. But even if it had been fundamental to some earlier religious orders in stimulating mutual knowledge and in governing interpersonal relationships, mutual criticism became for the first time institutionalized as a political mechanism in the Oneida Community. Thus it became the social axiom of the civic personality of the community.

In the same year as it was institutionalized in the community, mutual criticism was adopted as a test to which all new members of the Association were subjected. This proved far more demanding to aspiring members than other rules of the community, dissuading many potential members who were frightened of having to reveal, and possibly change, too many aspects of their personality. Mutual criticism was essential in contributing to the feeling of unity and even superiority and to collective exaltation in dealings with the outside world. It was used as a way of sustaining the social theory of complex marriage and as a productivity incentive at work. It helped many people give up tobacco⁶ and it cured various nervous disorders⁷.

Firstly let us analyze the structure of this system. Though it did not change in essence, it was subjected to alterations in different periods in the life of the community. Until 1849, the members of the Association offered themselves, during the periodical evening gatherings, to the judgement of the entire community. At the beginning of the '50's the community appointed a committee of four judges, chosen from the oldest and most eminent members, whose task it was to examine the character of individuals, who could be recalled by the judges, after deliberation, to continue discussion of their defects. In 1872, smaller groups of 10 to 15 people were created to make separate group analyses of the attributes and defects of each person. Results of these investigative meetings were subsequently published in *The Circular*, the community journal⁸.

Under questioning, members did not have the right to intervene in the proceedings except to point out manifest factual errors committed by the judges. In most cases it was the members themselves who came forward and asked to be interrogated, and those who were reluctant to do so encountered strong pressure amongst their fellow members to submit themselves to the process. Only Noyes himself was permanently exempt; a fact which, however, caused no opposition.

⁶ See Harriet Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories XIV* in: *Oneida Circular*, Oneida (N.Y.), 12-6-1871.

⁷ See H. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories XVI* in: *Oneida Circular*, 17-7-71. And *The Circular*, Brooklyn & Oneida (N.Y.), 24-6-1853.

⁸ *The Circular*, which changed name from *Free Church Circular*, to *The Circular*, to *Oneida Circular*, to *American Socialist*, was published from 1850 to 1879 at Oneida and some of its branches such as New York and Wallingford.

How did the judges apply their criteria of mutual criticism in assessing the defects of an individual, and what were those criteria? Importantly, they began with the concept of innate goodness. The Oneidians wrote in their pamphlets:

There should be discrimination between the spirit that is in a person, or his superficial character, and his heart, where Christ is. The object of criticism is only to destroy the husk, which conceals his inward goodness⁹.

In this social reconditioning they were largely successful. Judges were expected to perform their task with sincerity and straightforwardness never losing sight of the importance of the communal well-being. This does not mean that heavy criticism was never necessary or that strong positions were never taken, however there is no evidence in community documents that judges abused their role¹⁰.

The following is a representative and complete description of one of these criticisms:

Criticism of Mr. B. by a small committee

Critic No. 1 - B.'s earnestness and strength of character make him a very valuable member of society; but he needs cultivation and refinement.

Critic No. 2 - Mr. B. has all the solid qualities — firmness, uprightness and sincerity; he intends to deal justly with everyone.

Critic No. 3 - He is warm-hearted, and a man of tender, delicate sensibilities. I think he is governed by the Spirit of Truth more than most men; but his mind and manners do not fairly represent his heart.

Critic No. 4 - He is an unselfish man; free from envy and jealousy. He needs outward refinement. The inward beauty of his character is working out, and will eventually overcome all external defects.

Critic No. 5 - He is a philosopher- a man who thinks and reasons deeply; but he lacks simplicity in the expression of his thoughts.

With the words « he lacks simplicity in the expression of his thoughts », one touches a central element in the definition of the Oneidian « self » based on the externalisation of inward goodness by means of the immediacy of simple language. Mr. B. is still considered to be a victim of the super-structures of his mind which are articulated through confused and convoluted language. This leads to hindrance of the « fair representation » of his heart.

⁹ J.H. Noyes, *Male Continence*, Oneida, Office of the *Oneida Circular*, 1872; 30.

¹⁰ J.B. Ellis, who wrote his essay without having been to Oneida, stated that mutual criticism was used by the older to subdue the younger. Cfr. *Free Love and Its Votaries, or, American Socialism Unmasked: Being an Historical and Descriptive Account of the Rise and Progress of the Various Free Love Associations in the United States, and the Effects of Their Vigorous (sic) Teachings Upon American Society*. United States Publishing Co., N.Y., 1870, 141-143. Moreover the judges used it to wreak their resentment upon the ones who had refused their courtship. 144-145. Ibid. However this opinion is neither sustained by other historians nor appears from community documents.

Critic No. 6 - The interior of his character is excellent; but the exterior is faulty. In order to do him the good we wish to by this exercise, a severe criticism ought to be aimed at his faults. I do not believe in neglecting criticisms of the external character because the internal is good. I should advise him, instead of being contented with inward beauty, to think it of a great deal of importance to have a beautiful manifestation of it. We know that, except at times when his spirit is unusually free, his utterance is labored, tedious and awkward. He is aware of all this, and I hope he will not account it a small affair, but determine to qualify himself unto all pleasing and not limit his ambition to being merely a good man. At present he does not do justice to himself. I believe he has in him the soul of music — he feels the glorious emotions of which music is an expression; but he is not singer. Again, in regard to his business character, he has the reputation of perfect honesty; but there is a lack of science and tact in his business transactions which have brought him into many difficulties.

Critic No. 1 - He has large hope, and often promises more than fulfills disappoints folks; I think his business habits are quite bad — his financial accounts are always at « loose hands ». He needs to carry his conscientiousness into business affairs.

Critic No. 7 - It is true that he does not fulfill his promises. He is what I should call an outline-character; he makes excellent plans, but is careless in executing details.

Critic No. 8 - He is not as neat in his personal habits as good taste requires; he needs to pay more attention to outward adornment.

Critic No. 6 - The principle of polishing the outside is the principle of democracy...

In this case « principle of democracy » refers to the necessity of each individual to express his practical and intellectual potential to the full having eliminated all external conditioning.

...I am in favor of free democratic principles in regard to the different faculties of our nature. Every member of our personalities has its rights; the external senses have their rights as well as the mind;...

« The external senses » are those tied to material pleasures of life.

...and because they are subordinated in the body politic, are they to be trampled under foot? Let us carry out democracy and assert that all the senses and susceptibilities, even those most inferior, have their rights, and show them a wise and generous attention. We should not devote all the wealth that God has given us to a certain part of our nature, but let every part have his rights¹¹.

From reading this, a certain attention to detail, which remains predominantly abstract, is evident. Individualistic tendencies were described in terms of their public manifestations and their influence on community life, without reference to specific instances. This enabled the criticised person to correct his ways without resorting to direct accusation. By never losing sight of the universal benefits of an altruistically oriented expression of an individualistic tendency or activity, the fundamental tenets of the community

¹¹ W.A. Hinds, ed., *Mutual Criticism*, Oneida, Office of the *American Socialist*, 1876; 44-46.

were constantly encouraged. Excessive self-denial was considered as unacceptable as selfishness. Laziness or superficiality were regarded with no less disapproval than over-zealousness. Love had to be neither so broad as to be vague, nor so concentrated as to be exclusive. Similarly, love of God had to be neither blinded by bigotry, nor lost in doubt.

One of the earliest reports of the results of mutual criticism appeared in the *First Annual Report* in 1849. The committee of judges stated as follows:

There were three particulars suggested to us in the beginning that we should bear in mind as prominent faults of the Association. 1st, a want of repose, — restlessness; 2d, the spirit of levity — want of earnestness; 3d, a contrary spirit. We found that one or other of these faults was constitutional in almost every member; they were observable in the manner of receiving criticism. Some appeared to have over anxiety for criticism — a little impatient for the tide of improvement. In others there was a slight disposition to lightness, and unprofitable talk about the subject. Our conversation with some seemed to open the door for the Spirit of judgment from God, while the active presence of this spirit in others forestalled much criticism. We think that the spirit of judgment is fast superceding the use of external discipline¹².

Despite early problems of approach, the first results were generally encouraging: out of ten cases taken from the *First Annual Report*, four women and one man declared that they had acquired much more faith in others and learned to love the next person with greater altruism than had previously been the case. Two women and one man felt more active, positive, and closer to God.

« The effect upon me, [declared for ex. Mr. Burt] of the system of criticism practised in this body, has been to bring my mind to decided action, and give me power to expel defects which had long been manifest to myself, but which were too strong for me ».

And his wife stated: « Criticism has been a stimulant to action with me. It has drawn me nearer to God »¹³.

One man discovered the benefits of humility and one young and beautiful woman became aware of the happiness obtained by dedicating herself to self-improvement rather than worrying about personal attraction¹⁴.

Individual will and determination emerged as the key elements of satisfaction experienced by the first members to subject themselves to analysis and interrogation. Without the impediment of formal restrictions, each member was

¹² *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association: Exhibiting Its History, Principles, and Transactions To January 1, 1849.* Leonard & Co., Oneida Reserve (Oneida), 1849, 46-49.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

encouraged to become conscious of his or her failings in a judicial structure, and an atmosphere which was at once friendly and encouraging whilst remaining detailed and rigorous.

1849 was a year of great enthusiasm for the members of the community, as spiritual and economic programmes began to take shape, and during the frequent meetings through the year many discussions revolved around the improvement of agricultural systems and the introduction of new crops. By the beginning of the 1850's some two hundred people constituted the active workforce of the community, totally committed to the construction of a society which had greater human and ethical value than the wider national system in which it existed.

Decisions taken regarding systems of work were never considered definitive, but were always subject to reconsideration. This can be seen for example, in the meetings which took place starting from 10th February, 1861, during which the sale of silk thread was decreed harmful because, despite its commercial success, it meant that peddlers had to be absent from the community for long periods of time¹⁵. The objection here was peddlers' contact with the climate of plunder and death out of which the Civil War was to be born – a war to which Noyes and his companions were vigorously opposed.

In 1856, the second year of crucial importance to our research, there was a new change in the life of the community: for a year or so animal traps had been manufactured and community members had been involved in considerable numbers in an attempt to improve the ailing economy. This led to even greater contact with the outside world, already made frequent by the commerce of silk thread within the county, and left a vacuum inside the community which the adolescent members found difficult to cope with. Finding themselves isolated from this external commercial life, they began to become antagonistic towards the adult population. They began to avoid evening meetings and spend more and more time amongst themselves in search of romantic love. The adults had not really taken into account the fact that the children had not joined the community out of choice, as they had done, accepting all the rules of community life. Harriet Worden, an old member, writes in her memoirs, taken from *The Circular*, about this problem:

The education of the first generation was a very important event in our history, for it must be remembered that the young people constituting this class were brought here by their parents; and though the influence of the Community was strong upon them, still they had been pretty thoroughly imbued with worldly notions which only time and suffering could eradicate. It certainly was not enough that they should be industrious, or faithful in observing the family ordinances; they might submit peaceably to all outward regulations, and yet it was evident that if their education in the fundamental Doctrine of Bible Communism was deficient, all attempts to organize them into the family would prove a failure¹⁶.

¹⁵ *The Circular*, 4-4-1861.

¹⁶ H. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories XXI* in: *The Circular*, 2-10-71.

For the first time since the inception of the community, mutual criticism had to take its rebels to task. Every Wednesday evening, starting from January 31st., 1856, meetings were held at which the children, whose presence was obligatory, were taught that the love of one's own senses, however stimulating and exciting, is not real love because it does not bring one any nearer to God¹⁷. This episode shows the way in which misdemeanour was not treated traditionally as a punishable offense, but as a source of personal shame and embarrassment for behavior counter to the moral code of the community. The idea of straightforward punishment, sufficiently unpleasant to deter repetition, was carefully avoided, and replaced by an attempt at correction which led to the offender actually not wanting to do wrong again. Following on from these weekly meetings, children were brought closer to older people and the spring and winter of '56 saw a period of renewed optimism and a re-awakening of community spirit which Harriet Worden expressed thus:

Suffice it is to say that when we accepted Christ as the king of our passions, when we made every other love subservient to our love for him, when we learned self-control, when we learned to value unity above passions, then the problem was solved¹⁸.

The revival of criticism which accompanied this period was the result of a general realisation that, without regular and disciplined meetings, the cohesion of the community began to show dangerous weaknesses. A sustained drive was engaged to make sure that work should be no more burdensome than necessary and that everybody should feel enthusiastic about their work and willingly accept more as and when it arrived.

From this moment onwards the organisation of work began to assume its definitive shape. All of the following activities had their own committee of organisation: building, shoe-making, clothing, printing, food (including dairy production, poultry, bees, fruit and vegetables), silk trading, dentistry, road-building, education, and finally what passed under the name of « to do what they pleased » which meant free time. Free time included all recreational activities from art to open-air games, all of which were given great importance. The rotation of duties within each department varied. In the manufacturing sectors, the workers changed jobs every year, whilst in other sectors – in the kitchens, for example – the staff would be reorganised as often as every month, as this was not considered very interesting work.

¹⁷ From then on, the new generations were « initiated » sexually by the older members of the community as soon as they reached puberty. It was often the case that young fifteen year olds had their first sexual relations with individuals of sixty, so that they might better learn to practice male continence and avoid the perils of romantic involvement. In this way adolescents were expected to show their maturity by their willingness to accept the rules of ascending fellowship without reserve. While children remained in the Children's House they were expected instead to acquire the capacity to get along with everyone without forming preferential friendships among their fellows. But horizontal fellowship was admitted. Cfr. P. Noyes, *My Father's House. An Oneidian Boyhood*, Peter Smith, Gloucester (Mass.), 1966.

¹⁸ H. Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories XXI* in: *The Circular*, 2-10-71.

Heads of department were nominated annually by Noyes and other community sages, according to their specific qualities and also taking into account the suggestions of other community members of all departments¹⁹. Women were by no means confined to domestic work and had managerial tasks in sectors to which they were considered better suited than men: the organisation of the kitchens, the laundry, the manufacture of preserved fruit, the organisation of free time, education, the production of silk (from 1865); and, though not as much as men, in the editing and publication of essays and periodicals. Nevertheless, although they organised meetings amongst themselves, women community members were still subject to the deliberations of the central committee which was composed entirely of men²⁰.

During the '60's the fur-trapping and preserved fruit businesses flourished and the community workforce gradually became insufficient to cover increased production. In 1863 labour recruitment from the outside began, with some working inside the community and others working for it from their homes outside. The entry of outsiders into the community caused no disturbances as they were not given influential jobs to do. The working spirit of Oneida was motivated by a feeling of collective commitment in daily duties, however humble, for the general and individual good in order to establish an environment of harmony and co-operation.

With the arrival of outside workers the community went into its strongest period of mutual criticism, and three reasons, above all others, stand out: firstly, the rapid development of manufactured goods and the demand for new technical expertise which could have attracted attention away from the spiritual side of community life. Secondly, the daily contact with external hired labour and the different and possibly harmful ways of life introduced by outside workers, many of whom were women and thus offered temptations of a romantic nature. Thirdly, the new opportunities which were opened up to women also needed to be harnessed within the system of criticism.

We can analyse the reports of fourteen meetings, of which ten concern women, considered either too efficient or insufficiently so. Also considered are superficiality, indolence, stubbornness, and lack of constructive criticism.

It was, for example, said of Mrs. L. that:

There is a very active spirit of curiosity in her, which makes her want to know everything that is going on... She has great faculty for finding out things... [but]

¹⁹ If you read the names of male department heads from the end of the 1850's till 1863, you can notice a certain mobility. But amongst a population of some hundred adult males, rotating names are only thirty. You can also notice that such people as, for example, Newhouse (the trap inventor), always remained at the head of the department they created. Cfr. *The Circular*, 26-3-1863.

²⁰ *Hand-Book of the Oneida Community: Containing a Brief Sketch of Its Present Condition, Internal Economy and Leading Principles*. No. 2. Office of the Oneida Circular, Oneida, 1871; 29.

L.'s social state and character are unsatisfactory still, she has improved during the past year. She has never submitted to man in the way that the truth demands. There is a spirit in her that is insubordinate to man. She has, heretofore, exhibited a haughty spirit — one that delighted to see a man at her feet — exulted to have a man humiliate himself before her. This, however, is not so manifest as formerly. Is intensely personal in her fellowships. Is exclusive. Does not stand as a good representative and teacher in regard to social relations²¹.

And of Mr. J. that:

He is ingenious and has a great deal of nicety about his business and a good faculty for getting up various tools and keeping them nice, being very careful of them, wanting a place for everything and everything in its place. He is very kind hearted and accomodating, and is loyal to the Community... [but] He is liable to be too circumscribed in his work — does not sufficiently take in the whole Community interest — is liable to get hold of some onside interest, something that he is particularly interested in, and give his whole attention and sympathy to that branch. He is too much taken up with personal, private enterprises, and looks out too much for self interest in little matters, which interferes with his growth in a public capacity²².

Contrary examples to these are the cases of Mrs. S. and Mr. A. Of the first it is observed that:

She is a woman of faith and loyalty; is very faithful in business, and always kind. She criticises herself... But she needs intellectual culture; is too circumscribed in this respect... She works too hard; takes too much upon her. She is always ready to aid in cases of need²³.

And of Mr. A., it is said that:

A.'s greatest worth is his moral and religious worth. This is a very fortunate inheritance to start with. It is easy to see that he is a very honest and conscientious man... [but] He talks so much that he is negligent of duties. He has improved in promptness, still, people always expect to wait for him²⁴.

It is evidently difficult to distinguish which are the defects and which the virtues to which the Oneida Community members were supposed to aspire. But within it one can see a continuous study of attitude towards life, faith and relationships with others which is as carefully balanced as possible and the idea of which is to reach self-expression through self-dominion.

The following letter confirms that, as far as we can know, until this moment all criticism was readily accepted, even if it was traumatic and caused extreme shame and embarrassment:

²¹ *The Circular*, 23-4-1863.

²² *The Circular*, 30-4-1863.

²³ *The Circular*, 26-3-1863.

²⁴ *The Circular*, 9-4-1863.

I could not help being reminded of this incident while thinking of my experience in offering myself for criticism a short time since. I wished to be criticised and told of my faults with sincerity; but I felt very much the same dread of it that I did of the plunge into the water. However, I determined to offer myself, and did so. Although I knew very well before much that would be said, it was hard to be confirmed by the opinions of others in the estimation of my character, and I could not at first see any love in the sincerity displayed, and it made me miserable for awhile; but my sorrow drove me to God with an earnest desire to become a humble, teachable servant to do his work. I found comfort and balm in Christ's life and words. When the immediate pain which the criticism had inflicted was gone, I felt a lightness of heart and calm happiness which I would not have exchanged for all the wealth of the world. I felt reconciled to God, and prayed that I might not have to repeat his chastisements because of my inattention.

I thank God for our system of criticism, which is attaining a state of perfection worthy of the end it has in view. Though the Spirit of Truth is sharp and cuts as a two-edged sword, it brings with it also the balm of Gilead and the peace of heaven.

Tirzah²⁵

The trauma and its attendant negative emotions, all turned in upon the self, were seen as vehicles to control which finally « free » the self from passionality and leave it open to serene expression.

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In piecing together the essential aspects of the life of the Oneida community, we have often referred to emotional self-control as the fundamental quality required for the attainment of perfection. Within this discipline, complex marriage was both the most extreme yet also the most crucial element. In this, Noyes and his companions detached themselves significantly from other fashionable movements of free love, moving closer to the experience of the Shakers.

Noyes himself pointed out the danger of « licentiousness » hidden in free love which was untrammelled by pacts of any formal nature.

Before founding the community, the patriarch of Oneida had scrutinised other utopian experiments which had taken place during the 1830's, and he had noticed that the communities (for example Brook Farm and New Harmony), in which the expression of emotions was openly encouraged, had soon collapsed in the face of the social ties imposed upon individuals by a community lifestyle. Noyes very much admired the Shakers' ability to abstain from sexual relations. The application of male continence at Oneida was intended to carry one beyond chastity to an attitude which removed all forms of emotive sentiment from sexual relations, putting them onto an emotional plane similar to other forms of social interaction. As was the case with the Shakers, moments of collective emotional commitment were limited to the

²⁵ *The Circular*, 23-4-1863.

great feasts which periodically animated community life. On these occasions there was dancing, games were played and elaborate meals were prepared.

A distinctive feature of the Oneida community was thus clearly that through self-dominion each individual had not just the opportunity, but indeed the obligation, of self-expression. Whereas in the outside world people may have had to live without emotional gratification for one reason or another, the structure of complex marriage guaranteed close physical and emotional involvement with the opposite sex to all members of the community. During recreational activity men, women, old people and children all played together, bridging the gap between sexes and generations.

Unlike many other religious communities, the Oneidians were not hostile towards the outside world, despite the fact that it was considered by its very nature to be inferior. Good relations were carefully fostered through commercial, domestic and social ties including forms of parties which, for a small fee, people could attend from all around the county. Tourists and visitors were all accorded friendly hospitality even for long periods.

Oneidians may have considered themselves all superior to outsiders, but there was not equality of status inside the community among members. Some were considered closer to salvation on earth – the ultimate goal – than others, and therefore worthy of a higher position. The system of mutual criticism permitted the oligarchy of the founding fathers to hold onto power and influence throughout the entire duration of the life of the community.

George Cragin, who was an old friend of Noyes and had been a faithful disciple of his from the beginning of Oneida, wrote of mutual criticism:

Criticism, as a general rule, is given by the superior to the inferior. In a silent way the advancing, progressive nations, criticise those that are not so; civilisation criticises barbarism; sound reason criticises impulses of the will and feelings;... Truth criticises falsehood²⁶.

Very few people were in a position to claim that they were close to the truth and thus fit to hold power. The hierarchy was based on age with the men taking precedence over the women in every age group.

Until the '60's, when there was a movement among the young for greater autonomy and independence, this system worked very well; there was no conflict within the community; collective well-being was effectively guaranteed, and the abuse of power and exploitation were both unknown. New members of the community learned the rules quickly, and if you wanted to leave there was nothing to prevent you from doing so. Those who chose to remain, devoted themselves to ever greater self-dominion through which they acquired the respect of all. This search for self-dominion was the cornerstone of the community, and its widespread acceptance bound people

²⁶ *The Circular*, 12-3-1863.

together. This worked perfectly until the first young generation, which had grown up in the community, wanted, at the beginning of the '70's, to replace axioms and conventions which had been created by the original founders with their own ideas, thus causing the eventual dissolution of the community²⁷.

²⁷ On the Break-up see: C.N. Robertson, *Oneida Community: the Breakup 1876-1881*. Syracuse, 1972. And M.L. Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation*. The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1969.