THOMAS BRANAGAN was one of America's most prolific authors during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. He published something more than twenty separate volumes in verse and prose, some of them running through at least five editions within as many years, all of them read, and most of them apparently popular. His occasional verse appeared in broadsides and copiously in the newspapers, and his book-length narrative of *Avenia* in 1805 was the first poem of any considerable length devoted in this country to the subject of negro slavery.

Yet Thomas Branagan appears in none of our literary histories, is mentioned in none of our biographical dictionaries, is not even given a line in the detailed local histories in which loyal Philadelphians have chronicled their cultural past. He is one of a score of forgotten men who wrote before Irving, Cooper, Longfellow and Poe, who anticipated something of Emerson and Whitman, and who—if we are to understand what we do or do not have of cultural heritage—should not be passed over.

Thomas Branagan, thus neglected, could be introduced here from several points of view: as an early American literary adventurer; as a representative of the impact of unruly Irish manners on polite American culture; as a murky mirror of early nineteenth-century popular taste; as a popularizer of current ideas—somewhat in the manner of Thomas Paine or Robert Ingersoll; as an early reformer—a disciple of Howard, Godwin, Day; as a literary Lorenzo Dow who wrote Methodism and evangelism and popular religion enthusiastically into tracts, much as Norman Vincent Peale has done today. Instead, perhaps we can glance at him briefly as—in addition to all these—a coincidental representative of certain aspects of English romanticism which we are sometimes taught did not appear in nineteenth-century America until many years later.
Thomas Branagan was born in Dublin, of a respectable, reasonably well-to-do Roman Catholic family on December 28, 1774. His boyhood, he says, was unhappy. His mother died when he was five, and he was brought up by a father who seemed to the boy “destitute of parental tenderness.” His schoolmasters were unfeeling and cruel, so that his whole life in Dublin until he was fourteen was remembered as “a continual scene of misery.” This in spite of the fact that “my father . . . took pains to give me a good education, but in vain; for, though he gave me in charge of the best teachers, I continued what is generally called a dunce.”

Dunce or not, Branagan seems to have been a sensitive, devout young man who particularized his sins in a pocket diary, “in order to relate them,” he explained, “to the priest with more facility.” The beggars of Dublin moved him to such pity that he vowed to devote half his earnings to the poor forever. “Truly,” he said, “I was a little zealous devotee.” In school, meanwhile, he experienced continuing difficulties: I was “flagellated until I was all in a gore of blood. . . . I do believe a child of common capacity, could have learned as much in nine months as I did in nine years.”

So, when he was fourteen, Thomas Branagan went to sea, first with his father’s consent on short voyages across to England, then to Spain on “a boisterous passage through the Bay of Biscay,” and later to Russia, Denmark, and Norway, to Prussia and Poland. Homesick then, after months away, he jumped ship when British soil was touched again, and beat his way back to Dublin where, instead of happy paternal greeting, he was met with reprimand—the captain was a friend of the elder Branagan and word of the runaway boy had reached home before he did. “I was so irritated at the reproval,” said

1 The Penitential Tyrant (New York, 1807), 2–3. Young Branagan’s chief affections went out to his old nurse, the wife of one of his father’s domestics, with whom he lived in the country until he was almost four. “My parents had adopted, and uniformly practised the unnatural custom, of sending their children at our birth, from under their inspection, and giving us in charge of nurses in their homes; and I recollect one of my sisters who was almost starved before it was found out by my father, who instantly had her taken home.” The Excellency of Female Virtue (New York, 1807), 136. “This unnatural mode of educating children, I consider one of the greatest misfortunes of civilized society, and pregnant with a thousand evils to both parents and children.” The Pleasures of Contemplation (Philadelphia, 1818), 39.


3 Avenia; or, A Tragical Poem (Philadelphia, 1805), 333.

4 The Penitential Tyrant, 3–4.

5 The Pleasures of Contemplation, 39–40.
Branagan, "that, in a few days after, I left my relatives and friends, without their knowledge and consent," and went to Liverpool, "having heard that a smart lad of moderate education and industrious habits, might get an eligible situation and good wages, to sail out of that port." The year was 1790; Thomas Branagan was sixteen, and now on his own.

He sailed from Liverpool on a slaver bound for West Africa, where he remained for some six months, exploring inland, trading with the natives, and buying slaves. Once, Melville-like, he deserted his shipmates for an idyllic few weeks among the simply hospitable and happy noble savages of the Gold Coast, who made him "as welcome in their rural abode," he said, "as if I had been a dear friend or relative." Though they knew him as a slave trader and "had not sufficient food for themselves, yet they divided it without my solicitation, and gave me a part without ever reproaching me." He could have filled a folio volume with his adventures there among the primitive blacks, with whom he found more kindness, more hospitality than among the Christians of Europe or America.

After sharing in the profits when the cargo of slaves was sold in Granada, Branagan set out for the West Indies, where he sailed from St. Eustatia for Savannah, "escaping many alarming dangers on the American coast." He next signed in the service of the Dutch on vessels which supplied garrisons throughout the Caribbean. Finally, he joined an English privateer, until his conscience got the better of him and he left this nefarious business to become an overseer on a sugar plantation in Antigua. There he remained four years, experiencing "a variety of adventures," and would "in all likelihood have been advanced to what the world calls a gentleman; but I preferred virtue in rags, to vice arrayed in costly clothing."

6 The Penitential Tyrant, 4.
7 Ibid., 7-8; see also The Pleasures of Contemplation, 17-18.
8 The Penitential Tyrant, 11-12. "We cruised off the harbours of Cape Françoise and Port-au-Prince, from whence the rich planters were making their escape, with all their wealth, in American vessels, from the fury of the negroes, who were at this time in a state of insurrection. And while these unfortunate persons were thus sailing for American ports, we constantly captured and robbed them of all their property. . . . While I was on board of this privateer, however, I was enabled to see, by the light of the good spirit of Grace . . . that privateering was as wicked in the sight of heaven, as high-way robbery, hence I relinquished all my prize money, which would have amounted to several thousand dollars." A Beam of Celestial Light, 293-294.
9 The Penitential Tyrant, 16; see also A Beam of Celestial Light, 295.
It seems to have been at about this time or earlier, at any rate by the time he was twenty-one, that Branagan succumbed to a new, very severe, and lasting religious experience. He was converted to Protestantism, probably by the Moravians, possibly by the Methodists, or, as he put it, “the gracious Redeemer had compassion upon me, and blessed me with a sense of his pardoning love and regenerating grace.” And soon “I got convinced,” he continued, “of the great evil of slavery and saw that those who took any act or part thereof, were guilty of oppression in the sight of God.” Therefore, “although religious friends and even the Methodist preachers who generally kept slaves, all advised me to continue my employment, I was necessitated by conscience to give it up.”

Not long afterwards, “I voluntarily relinquished . . . [my] lucrative situation in Antigua, and threw myself on that all-beneficent providence, which hitherto has provided for me, and, I trust, will provide for me in all time coming.”

Interpreted from another point of view, he left Antigua for Dublin to see to the settling of his father’s estate. His relatives in Ireland greeted him cordially after his eight years of absence. But, “when they understood that I had forsaken the church of Rome, they persecuted me as a heretic, and defrauded me of my rights with impunity.” Then it was that Branagan determined to seek his way to America. He laid out what funds he had in certain unidentified “valuable articles,” which he shipped on board a schooner bound for Philadelphia, and he himself took passage on the same vessel.

His arrival in the new world was not propitious. Let him tell the story:

. . . the vessel on which my property was shipped, was caste away, at the Capes of Delaware, and I lost it all, my clothes excepted, and I was robbed of them by one of the passengers, who also robbed me of two silver watches, one of which I detected on his fob, and my apparel on his back; of course I recovered a part of my clothes, and one watch, and advised the man, who was a Friend by profession, not to do so any more, as in a strange land, by acting in this manner, he would ruin his character and come to nothing.

But even misfortune had its bright side:

I can not but admire the infinite goodness and wisdom of my good God, in this afflictive dispensation of his gracious providence: while chief-

10 A Beam of Celestial Light, 294.
12 The Penitential Tyrant, 20–21.
overseer, I became exceeding proud, having an elegant horse to ride upon, a servant to follow me, being clothed in gay even foppish apparel, and having every accommodation to make life agreeable, and no labour, it was absolutely necessary in order to crucify my proud spirit, to reduce me to poverty in a strange land.\(^{13}\)

There seems to be no record existing of how Thomas Branagan, thus humbled, made his way in the Quaker City. "About three years after my arrival," that is, in 1801, "it was in my mind," he tells us, "to preach the gospel; which I did with the approbation and consent of one of the most pious sects in America, to which I then belonged." The sect, we suppose, was Methodist, perhaps Moravian. "I used to visit and preach to the poor and the needy, the halt, the maimed and the blind, in the Bettering-house, and scarcely missed one Sabbath in about two years."\(^{14}\) Meanwhile he had married and had fathered one son, who died, "a new saint," on October 22, 1802, at the age of twenty-one months. A second son, born in 1803, died five years later. A third, born in 1812, lived only one week.\(^{15}\)

Some six years after his arrival in Philadelphia, Thomas Branagan began to break into print. "It was in my mind to bear testimony against slavery, from the press, as well as the pulpit; and it was astounding how my good God qualified me for this service." He admitted himself "assuredly destitute of every natural qualification, necessary to appear before the public as an author." He had "little school learning, less natural capacity, and scarcely common sense; but the Almighty," he explained, "generally makes us of such poor, ignorant, destitute creatures, to confound the wisdom of the wise . . . and mighty."\(^{16}\) Within two years, in 1804 and 1805, four separate books surged from his pen, two in verse, two in prose, each devoted to a full-hearted humanitarian argument against traffic in human beings.

The first was in prose, *A Preliminary Essay, on the Oppression of the Exiled Sons of Africa. Consisting of Animadversions on the Im-*

\(^{13}\) *A Beam of Celestial Light, 295–296.*

\(^{14}\) *Ibid., 296.* Though I have come on no proof, I believe that Branagan was converted to Protestantism by Moravian missionaries in the West Indies, but that he turned to Methodism, perhaps soon after his arrival in Philadelphia.

\(^{15}\) See *Aenida, 171* (note), and also Burial Records, Board of Health, Phila., 1807–1814. His wife, Ann Branagan, died on Apr. 28, 1830, at the age of forty-seven. See Record of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, Phila. (1785–1856), I, 346.

\(^{16}\) *A Beam of Celestial Light, 296.*
policy and Barbarity of the Deleterious Commerce and Subsequent Slavery of the Human Species. It was presented "by Thomas Branagan, Late a Slave-trader from Africa, and Planter in Antigua; who, from conscientious motives, relinquished a lucrative situation in that island; and now from a deep sense of duty, publishes to the world the tragical scenes, of which he was a daily spectator, and in which he was unhappily concerned." The volume was dedicated to "all friends of humanity, particularly the president and members of the Abolition Society, and the people commonly called Quakers, who, by their distinguished exertions, for the suppression of slavery, and the relief of the oppressed Africans, have done immortal honour to themselves — to humanity, and the Christian name."  

Thomas Branagan was a plain man. "To novelty of sentiment, or to refinement of composition," he said, "he does not pretend." Neither could be expected from a slave trader or a West Indian planter. His was a labor of pious love, and he defied "logicious cavillers and snarling critics" to find fault as they would, either with his matter or his manner. He was no weaver of fancy dreams, no romancer, no novelist. The merits of his cause would plead excuse, even for his literary inaccuracies. He wrote plain sense, as a plain man, for plain people. He wrote not for fame or gain, but for the good of mankind. He knew that of which he wrote. He had been there.

Yet what, he asked, might he expect to be the fate of his "humble, but well-meant, endeavours" for the good of his contemporaries? "While the phantoms and dreams of romancers and novelists are read with assiduity, my performances will, doubtless, be by many treated with great neglect." How slothful, negligent of every good thing was his age! "To my serious strains the ear is shut; and the heart impenetrable," while at the same time "the idle fopperies and the foolish dreams" of the romancer "find the readiest access and the kindest entertainment." The reader of fiction, he charged

is amused, he is delighted, he is in raptures. Delusory prospects, fanciful scenes open to him, with which he is, at once, astonished and delighted. Every thing he sees is marvelous. Every house is a palace or a cottage; every

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17 A Preliminary Essay, 2. There is a persistent, teasing suggestion that Branagan himself may at one time in his career have embraced or come close to embracing the Quaker faith, though I find no records to substantiate this.

18 Ibid., 5.
man an angel or a fiend; every woman a goddess or a fury. Here the scene momentarily varies; and assumes new appearances. Now it is a dreary castle full of spectres and ghosts, robbers and murderers. Next moment it is a beautiful villa or a splendid palace, resounding with the notes of festivity or joy. Now it exhibits the appearance of a loathsome dungeon, with rattling chains and chilly damps. Suddenly it is changed into a beautiful garden with fragrant flowers, blushing parterres, inviting fruits, and melodious songs; by which the juvenile mind is entangled and infatuated. Then succeed adventures, intrigues, rapes, duels, elopements, darts, sighs, groans, armies, murders. Debauchery, in this way, assumes the form and name of gallantry.—Revenge is termed honour. Thus the destruction of the human soul is accomplished; the arts of seduction are practised, and female innocence is ruined. Thus libertines endeavour, too successfully endeavour, to emancipate mankind from the shackles of religion and morality. This they call freedom. Fatal freedom! . . . they debase themselves to a level with the brutes; and, like them, abandon themselves to every species of sensuality.  

With no such perverting vagaries would Thomas Branagan concern himself. He would write only of what he knew, of simple moral truths which would touch and uplift the human heart. Not only was the African oppressed, but what shocking barbarities were practiced against him! Branagan wrote at length then on the beauty and the fertility of the green hills of Africa, the humanity and hospitality he had experienced there among the natives. “After all my travels, in both the old and new worlds, I do not hesitate to say, this is the most beautiful and the most fertile country I ever beheld.” Its happy inhabitants reclining under lofty palms! “What simplicity in their dress, and in their manners! How innocent, benevolent, and hospitable!” Yet how the white man has tricked them. Again Branagan bears testimony also to his own unhappy part in this treachery: “. . . in the midst of remonstrances, and lamentations, and shrieks, sufficient to pierce the mountains and rocks, I have torn and dragged from their happy country” these once happy people. Now is he haunted by the memory:

See them collected in flocks, and, like a herd of swine, driven to the ships. They cry, they struggle, they resist; but all in vain. No eye pities; no hand helps. Into the hold of the vessel they are forced. Their limbs, already wounded and lacerated, and bloody, are loaded with heavy chains. Such numbers are compressed within so small a space, that the air almost imme-

19 Ibid., 12, 22–24.
diately becomes pestilential; from the putrid effluvia of which they contract diseases. . . .

Exposed to "every insult and abuse, . . . men and women entirely naked" are examined "more minutely than the butcher does the cattle he intends to purchase. The poor female slaves, innocent and unaccustomed to debauchery, are ready to sink with shame and grief." Husbands are parted from wives, children from mothers, each to undergo miseries in the sugar fields. How merciless the driver's whip! How wretched the huts in which they rest their bleeding bodies! How poor and scant the food they are allowed to eat! On some estates they are not even permitted to wear clothes! They are subject to whippings on every occasion, to rape on almost every.20

This, as he had said, was no romancer's dream. It was realistic, and sensational. Branagan had been there. He knew. He recorded fact. "I write not what I have read or heard, but what I saw; and, to my shame I must add, what I did; for in the tragical scene I was an actor."21 His was a confession, written, we must suppose, with intention no less sincere than that of Jean Jacques Rousseau or Benjamin Franklin. And yet, at the same time, he satisfied his readers with all the trappings of Gothic thrill—the chains, the whip, the sadistic, the sexual titillation. He wrote of colorful and mysterious regions far away. He played on the sure knowledge of his contemporaries that primitive man, untainted by civilization, was fine and pure and happy. He touched strongly on the quivering string of humanitarian sympathy which made men of sense and of sensibility equally aware of the advantages to be derived from applying the Golden Rule. More than this, it was exhibitionism, realism, Gothicism, primitivism and humanitarianism written for the common man, leveled to a set of responses of which the simple reader was capable.

For Branagan's intention throughout was rhetorical: he wanted to persuade. He had something important to say, and he wanted to reach as many people as possible. *A Preliminary Essay* was exactly what its title suggested, a prologue to later publications, particularly to a work in verse of "considerable magnitude, in which he has been employed for some years." It was Branagan's conviction "that many will read a performance in poetry; who could not be induced to

peruse the same materials, however well arranged and digested, in prose.” Poetry was more elevated, more serious, more inspirational: readers in the early nineteenth century were accustomed to find their own highest aspirations mirrored there. The “younger sort,” Branagan thought, were especially “fond of poetical compositions” because it was easier for them “to retain in their memories a metrical, than a prosaic” argument. It was for these reasons, then, that in his second book Thomas Branagan as a practical man turned, he said, to verse. Admitting his manifest inadequacies, he set his argument, and “with no small labour,” within the “form of a tragical poem. May it accomplish the salutary purposes for which I composed . . . it.”

The poem appeared early in 1805 as Avenia; or, A Tragical Poem on the Oppression of the Human Species, and Infringement of the Rights of Man. It was put together in six books, and admittedly in imitation of Homer’s Iliad. “Perspecuity instead of elegance, utility instead of method, the development of truth”—these, “instead of the flowers of rhetoric,” he insisted, “have been my primary objects in the prosecution of the work.” He sought no personal gain. His object was “the happiness, not the applause of mankind; to be useful rather than systematical . . . .” Above all, he would be plain: “The attempt to adorn truth . . . is like painting a diamond, in order to beautify it.” Perhaps nowhere in our literature of the early nineteenth century is there a clearer, more succinct statement of literature as a tool for the shaping of moral virtues than in these simply naive, sincere, admittedly plagiaristic platitudes of Thomas Branagan. More plainly than Hawthorne or Longfellow or any of the more sophisticated, artful writers of the mid-century, he represents the climate of popular opinion on things literary against which Poe protested.

Avenia, among the most useful, remained Branagan’s favorite work. It was his first, apparently begun before A Preliminary Essay. It was undertaken “from the most generous motives; namely, to vindicate injured innocence, and advocate the rights of man.” And in composing it Branagan was assisted, he was sure, “by some super-

22 Ibid., 5, 26–27.
23 Avenia, ix, 311. “. . . I have voluntarily delivered the manuscript to the printer for publication, gratis . . . if any bookseller should wish to publish another edition . . . he is . . . at liberty [to do so].” Ibid., 310 (note)–311 (note).
natural power; for no person saw the MSS. much less corrected it, till it was sent to the press."  

When I remember my profound ignorance at the time I commenced writing . . . and that I did not know what a semicolon, a note of admiration, or a quotation mark meant, I cannot help believing, that the Almighty ordered it so, that he might confound the wisdom of the wise, the scientific, the philosophic advocates of moral corruption, by the simple argumentation of an illiterate child of nature.

The "plan, the design, the arrangement of that Poem," he said, "are perfectly original." Only the versification was imitated, from Homer, as he admitted on the title page. And from more than Homer: "I availed myself of similitudes I had seen and copied pieces I had read." But it was all for good cause. "And where," he protested disarmingly, "is the author the most profound, that does not do the same? though, no doubt, more careful in their transposition than I was. Even Virgil . . . copied Homer."  

It seems perfectly clear that in imitating Homer, even talking about Homer, Branagan copied Pope. And in spite of protestations that incidents of the poem were founded on fact and represented scenes which he himself had witnessed, it seems equally clear that Branagan's experience was transformed to familiar patterns of antecedent English verse:

Awake my muse, the sweet Columbian strain,  
Depict the wars on Afric's crimson plain.  
Sing how the poor, unhappy sable dames  
Are violated at their rural games;  
How Afric's sons surrounded with alarms,  
Die in the cause of liberty, in arms;  
How with their bloody scourge the Christians go  
To Africa, dread ministers of woe;  
How big with war their tilting dungeons ride,  
Like floating castles o'er the yielding tide.  
What pen can half their villainies record?  
What tongue can count the slaughters of their sword?  

24 *The Pleasures of Contemplation*, 18. When a second edition was prepared in 1810, Branagan, however, did seek aid, from a benevolent, "respectable and amiable physician of Philadelphia [a certain Dr. (Thomas?) Atlee, of whom I have been able to discover little]; whose urbanity is only commensurate with his erudition," who corrected and revised the sometimes halting meter. Ibid., 19-20.  
25 Ibid., 18-19.  
26 *Avenia*, 15-16.
Which is exactly what Branagan sets out to recount. He tells of the princess Avenia, first seen in circumstances of idyllic, bucolic pleasure, attended by dusky nymphs who dance with her through the forest green—Avenia, in love with and loved by the faithful Angola, idolized by her brave big brother Louverture. Then, as her nuptuals are being celebrated with dance and song, the cruel Christians come and carry her off to captivity. Through five books there is a medley of pursuit and escape, of battle and retreat, as loyal African hosts turn in bloody conflict against the white marauders. The gallant Louverture dies bravely in heroic single combat; the prince Mondingo almost triumphs, until superior, efficient, civilized Christian weapons—of the kind Mark Twain was later to talk about—drive him also to defeat. In the end, the white men rout and slaughter their courageous dark opponents. Avenia is carried to a West Indian plantation, where she is sold and soon after ravished by her base new master, so that she flees from his lustful arms to a high rock which overhangs the sea and flings herself therewith to the more pure embrace of a watery grave.

No mortal eloquence can paint their woes,
Depict their wrongs, and malice of their foes:
Not MILTON's pen, nor SHAKESPEARE's tragic lyre,
Not HOMER's flame, nor POPE's poetic fire.27

Yet Thomas Branagan would try. And later in the same year, 1805, timed to reach the public just when the Missouri question of whether new states should be slave or free was being debated in Congress, he tried again, with the publication of a second poem, The Penitential Tyrant; or, Slave Trader Reformed, described as "a pathetic poem, in four cantos." It seems to be an earlier writing of Avenia, though it may be, as Branagan himself says, that its imperfections are due to the fact that it "was prepared hastily for the press, merely as a work that might do some good, and which at any rate would do no harm." It is less vigorous than Avenia, filled with generalized flights on the rural happiness of the African, the cruel designs of the white man, with bright descriptions of blood streaming from lacerated backs, of limbs festering in chains, of heartbreak as black families were torn apart, and of the sense of penitence which the writer felt for having had part in these things, the whole re-

27 Ibid., 256.
counted without identification of particularized characters (such as Avenia or Louverture) or of particularized battles or braveries. The verse seems not so tied to eighteenth-century models, but is, if anything, less competent than the verse of the earlier poem: "the unsystematical arrangement of my writings, the simplicity of my style, and the desultory plainness of my phraseology" are all, explained the author, "convincing circumstances . . . that I am far from aspiring to the reputation of an author." His aim was simple truth, unadorned, unadulterated.

Still later in that year he produced another pamphlet in prose, which he called *Serious Remonstrances Addressed to the Citizens of the Northern States, and Their Representatives: Being an Appeal to Their Natural Feelings & Common Sense: Consisting of Speculations and Animadversions, on the Recent Revival of the Slave Trade, in the American Republic: with an Investigation Relative to the Consequent Evils Resulting to the Citizens of the Northern States from that Event. Interspersed with a Simplified Plan for Colonizing Free Negroes of the Northern, in Conjunction with Those of the Southern Free States, in a Distant Part of the National Territory: Considered as the Only Possible Means of Avoiding the Deleterious Evils Attendant on Slavery in a Republic.* The title generously presents his argument almost complete. Branagan was one of those humanitarians to whom the opening of the West, particularly the Southwest, seemed to offer an opportunity for guilt-ridden American slave owners to hide their sins on the expanding frontier. His argument throughout was for colonization, and that is perhaps one reason why Branagan is not better remembered among historians of abolition movements in America.

But, that aside, as matter for the sociological historian, we find in this polemic volume another of Branagan's heightened, richly adorned pleas for simplicity. He postures almost like Whitman, and again presents competent evidence that writing with an eye on the proletariat was no invention of 1855, or of the 1930's:

That pedantic style, and systematical arrangement peculiar to many writers, must not be expected of this work. The writer has made it his particular object to digress from the common mode of composition in this respect, because he wishes not to please the learned, but to profit the illiterate, to convince the understandings, and not to gratify the literary

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28 *The Penitential Tyrant*, 3.
taste of his fellow citizens; and he flatters himself his plain arrangements will be as well received by the patriotic, the independent citizens of America, as if they were embellished with flowery emblems of fancy, the profound flourishes of rhetoric, the superfluous disquisitions of criticism, the majestic brilliancy of diction, and the fascinating flippancy of language . . . all of which in fact have no other tendency, than to demonstrate the pride and vanity of man’s degenerate heart, and lull the unguarded patriot, the industrious plebian, the virtuous farmer, and the honest mechanic asleep in the cradle of political sensibility.\textsuperscript{29}

Indeed, the “fascinating flippancy” of his time engaged some of Branagan’s most headlong diatribe:

\begin{quote}
The sable crimes of this licentious age,  
Condemn my silence past—demand my rage!  
\* \* \*  
Such blasphemy, and systematic swearing;  
Such bawding, drinking, stealing, lying, gaming;  
Such cold religion, warm incontinence;  
Such bare-fac’d treach’ry, and profuse expense;  
Such languid charity, and such daring crimes;  
Such shameless fashions, and such impious times.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Especially, such shameless fashions. In \textit{Avenia} he launches out on one parenthetical passage addressed to the “fair, half naked to the solar ray”:

\begin{quote}
\ldots the dresses now by women wore,  
Would make a harlot blush in days of yore.  
Such fashions have I seen in open day,  
Which decency forbids me to display;  
Their swelling breasts, their necks and elbows bare,  
With eyes enticing, and with curling hair,  
Their robes so fashion’d that degenerate men  
May fancy all the wond’rous charms within.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

“When I view the obscene, the indecent manner in which too many mothers dress their daughters,” he submitted in a footnote to \textit{The Penitential Tyrant},

I tremble, I tremble for their chastity! It is virtually tempting the debauchee to tempt them, and to lay a snare for their destruction. Nay, it is even inviting the lawless ruffian to acts of open violence; and, while female

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Serious Remonstrances} . . . , v.  
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{The Penitential Tyrant}, 57.  
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Avenia}, 260.
fashions continue to be so immodest, I think in point of common justice, the law applicable to such outrages [as rape] ought not to be so strict and severe. . . . How cruel . . . for a lascivious female . . . to dress in such a manner as not only to entice, but almost to force the male of ardent passions to acts of violence, and the law to condemn him to death, while she is suffered to pass with impunity.32

But this, sincere and fervent as it may have been, was aside from his main point. Branagan looked with compassion on even the potentiality of what he called the injured innocence of what he also called the American fair:

   By dire example ruin'd, thus wretched lies
   Millions of youthful dames with streaming eyes.33

So, as a well-meaning and impressionable man of his times, a rational and therefore a practical man, Branagan dealt in his next two books with just that subject, and offered forthright, practical advice. It seemed perfectly clear that young girls were seduced because young girls were ignorant, or, to put in another way, that women were enslaved by men in this as in other matters because women were not properly educated. Many people, including Mary Wollstonecraft in England and Branagan's fellow Philadelphian Brockden Brown, had said, were saying, just that.

Branagan, however, eschewed, he said, generalities, and came to grips with the realities of his own day. The principal reason, he submitted, why so many "ignoramusses abound in the country parts of the American Republic, is . . . that parents are so parsimonious or . . . avaricious, that they too often neglect to send their children to school."34 I would ask, he challenged, "what makes the distinction between the savage and the sage? The answer is obvious, INFORMATION. And yet forsooth thousands in this free country are indifferent with respect to obtaining information as if it was of no utility whatever." It is not knowledge for its own sake with which Branagan is concerned, but with useful knowledge, something which works to immediate practical advantage. And, he continued,

it is not only the plebeian who is thus blinded by local prejudices and sentimental ignorance, but even persons who are distinguished by their com-

32 The Penitential Tyrant, 182.
33 Avenia, 262.
34 The Flowers of Literature (Philadelphia, 1806), 233.
mmercial intercourse and consequent riches, who are notwithstanding some-
times as destitute of polite information as the wild Indians on the banks of
the Ohio; the reason is obvious, they are so immured in the tumult of busi-
ness, and perhaps the vicissitudes of folly, that they cannot be prevailed
upon to forego either.\textsuperscript{35}

Branagan rang no challenge to his countrymen to look out from
under their iron lids as Emerson did. He did not suggest that they
come out from behind their gigantic counter which Leigh Hunt saw
stretching along the Atlantic coast from Florida to Maine. He was a
practical man who, within limits, fitted his cloth to the disagreeable
pattern which mankind in its folly had made. So he compounded in
1806 a miniature five-foot bookshelf, an early nineteenth-century
digest for busy readers, a capsule catch-all of knowledge, which he
called \textit{The Flowers of Literature: Being a Compendious Collection of
the Most Interesting Geographical, Historical, Miscellaneous Sub-
jects in Miniature}. It was “intended to facilitate the improvement
of youth in particular, and adults in general, whose pecuniary re-
sources will not admit them to purchase, nor relative avocations
allow time to peruse voluminous productions on these important
heads.” Put together so that he who ran busily and he who could not
afford fine books might read, his compilation was, Branagan boasting,
if not original, at least “more comprehensive and embraces a greater
number of subjects than any other of the kind that has appeared in
this, or perhaps any other country.”\textsuperscript{36}

A year later, in 1807, he carried his crusade farther with a volume
entitled \textit{The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated}, which he
described as “an investigation relative to the cause and effects of the
encroachments of men upon the rights of women, and the too fre-
quent degradation and consequent misfortunes of the fair sex.” It
was intended “as a counterpoise to those vile and vulgar publications
which are continually teeming from our presses, and which secretly
instil the most destructive moral poison into the minds of the rising
generation, and eventually prove the destruction of thousands of the
giddy, the volatile, and the gay.” Specifically, he purposed
to inform the mind and establish the virtue of women; to erect ramparts in
order to stop seduction in its mad, and too successful career; shut the flood-

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, 7.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, 5.
gates of temptation which modern fashions have opened; shelter female innocence from the innovations of libertinism; and, finally, nurture the smallest bud of their juvenile virtue to its full blossom, and thereby promote individual tranquility, domestic felicity, national prosperity, and the honour and happiness of posterity.37

All the catchwords were there—they had to be, for they made up the facile language of a time when Washington Benevolent Societies, sons of Cincinnatus or of Tammany, patriotic and philanthropic groups of all kinds enjoyed mild orgasms of such hortatory banalities.

The Excellency of the Female Character makes excellently good reading, inevitably evocative of a kind of supercilious pleasure. The temptation is to quote from it at length, what Branagan further says of the "spurious, futile, and pernicious publications . . . teeming from our presses," perverting the innocent, yet rewarded with popularity; or what he has to say of the lusty menace of the debauchee, of the indecency of worsted pantaloons, or—in fascinated detail—of the new clinging and plunging French fashions. He quotes Pope, the Bible, William Livingston's Philosophic Solitude, Mrs. Rowson's Charlotte Temple, and, most frequently, himself. He suggests the establishment of a female university,38 and the isolation of syphilitic cases in almshouses and jails. He wonders what adolescents are coming to as he sees "little master Tommy . . . with his pantaloons up to his chin, his waistcoat about six inches long, his half boots with tassels, a watch on his fob, a club under his arm, and a segar in his mouth, strutting along with his arms a-kimbo, with all the self-consequence of a nabob."39 Young Master Tommy is a person we recognize, a cousin certainly of the attractive young fops Washington Irving and his friends were writing at just this time into Salmagundi, with which they kept New York in an uproar.

37 Ibid., iii, xii.
38 Elsewhere, in order to counteract the influence of aristocratic American colleges, he suggests the establishment of state universities "to be supported at the public expence," manned by "republican teachers . . . chosen by the legislature." They should be large, "sufficiently extensive for the accommodation of at least 3000 boys." A student's total expenses should be between $52 and $104 a year, and "the male orphans of veterans" should be educated gratis. Here all American boys, even the sons "of indigent citizens, may be taught all the useful branches of science; such as reading, writing, arithmetic, surveying, navigation, mensuration, anatomy, chemistry, botany, law, physic, &c. &c." The Charms of Benevolence, 24–25.
39 The Excellency of the Female Character, 29.
And here again Branagan vaunts what we are perhaps justified in calling his republican rhetoric: his insistence on his own simplicity, the simple common-sense utility of his message, and the simple language (or what he can approximate in his prolixity of simple language) in which he clothes it for simple people like himself:

My primary object is to be useful, without paying the least regard to the critic's malicious sneers, the debauchee's vindictive frown, or the fashionable dame's consequential declamations. . . . I conceive it to be the duty of an author, who writes for the good, not for the praise of man, to make his readers reflect, not laugh; to study utility more than elegance; brevity more than redundance; to forego prolixity and exhibit variety. A well-poised sentiment, a simplified argument, supported by reason and common sense, an instantaneous exhibition of a common fact, will have a better tendency to convince the understanding, inform the mind, and reform the heart, than volumes of elegant, refined but futile composition. 40

Caught up by the infectious flow of his own words and the intensity of his convictions, Thomas Branagan wrote on and on, repeating the few simple ideas which he put forth in his first volumes. His books came regularly from the press. The Beauties of Philanthropy and The Excellency of Virtue both appeared in 1808, The Intellectual Telescope and The Pleasures of Death in 1809. The Rights of God in 1812 and The Charms of Benevolence in 1813 seem to have been the most popular, and they ran through five editions each. He followed them with A Beam of Celestial Light in a Dark, Deluded, and Degenerate Age in 1814, The Pleasures of Contemplation and A Glimpse of the Beauties of Eternal Truth in 1817, and The Pleasures of Paradise in 1832. Less toothsome in title, but equally forceful, were his Political Dispositions on the Signs of the Times in 1807, his A Concise View of the Principal Religious Denominations in the United States in 1811, his The Pride of Britannia Humbled, or the Queen of the Ocean Unqueened, put together in 1815 as a triumphant catcall at the end of the second war with England, and his compendious The Guardian Genius of the Federal Union, in which in 1839, and again in 1840, he brought together the most tellingly rhetorical of his writings into what amounts to a two-volume anthology.

After Avenia and The Penitential Tyrant he published no separate volumes of verse, except the pamphlet entitled The Poetical Apotheo-

40 Ibid., 35, 52.
sis of General George Washington, written in 1811 to convince citizens of Philadelphia of the propriety of erecting a statue to the father of their country on Chestnut Street, opposite the State House. But dozens of Branagan's shorter poems, on virtue, on almshouses, on slavery, on the amelioration of conditions in American jails, on the virtue of young ladies, appear scattered through his prose tracts and also in the newspapers of his time, for, to put it mildly, he had a genius for getting into print.

Except for this, however, he seems to have been a very modest man, so that his personal career is extremely difficult to follow. In 1811 he broke from sectarian religious affiliations to become a stridently nonsectarian itinerate preacher, who traveled through all the middle and northern states spreading his philanthropic gospel. He had no use for well-fed, smug, fashionable clergymen, who were hypocrites, little better than panders. His mission was to the poor, "the sons and daughters of misery and misfortune," he called them, and he carried his message to them "in their wretched lanes and alleys." Sometimes they turned on him with hooting and garbage and stones. "I used to deliver my message, on horseback, in the streets, in the highways, in private houses, school houses, and meeting houses." Once, he remembered,

when passing through Princeton, New-Jersey, I felt it my duty to address the collegians relative to the true Christian divinity. . . . I therefore posted my bill on the market-house, and rode up the street till I was nearly opposite the college, when with palpitating heart, quivering voice, and eyes fast closed, I sung a hymn, still on horseback—a crowd of collegians and others soon gathered, and some began to laugh an geer [sic], when I began my discourse, but soon were all attention, and continued so till I ended it.

"Thus," he went on, "I delivered either a written, printed, or verbal address in every hamlet, town, and city I passed through between Philadelphia and the District of Maine." He planned to extend his mission among all the "cities and seaport towns between . . . Maine and Georgia, through which I expect to travel for truth's sake." Indeed, "were I possessed," he said, "with the voice of a trumpet, and adamantine lungs, methinks I would

41 A Beam of Celestial Light, 298.
43 Ibid., 9.
make all America reverberate with my remonstrances.” He traveled some seven hundred miles, on foot and on horseback, entreating his listeners: “Seek Christ in your hearts. . . . Turn from all men to the light within.” And he sought earnestly within himself for the truths which he knew were there. A journal which he kept of his travelings was “so tainted with enthusiasm,” which seemed to him a worldly thing, that he later burned it.

After 1818 little is discovered of Branagan’s activities, except for an occasional glimpse as he continues to speak and write valiantly, “to please, to honour, to glorify God, and be a benefit and consolation to his intelligent but unfortunate creatures.” The naked truth of his writings, he said, “made me a host of the most deadly foes, and at least helped to leave me without a single friend.” Yet he suffered this, and more, gladly:

My life has been threatened; I have been falsely sworn against, and so grievously calumniated, by the professors of religion, that it is only of God’s counteracting mercy that I have a place to lay my weary head, or a crust of bread to eat. This ingratitude, from those for whose happiness I have sat up many a cold night, and wrote thousands of pages, is also a blessing, and has a direct tendency to wean me more and more from this faithless world, and to stimulate me more and more to seek my happiness in God alone.

Thus humbled, thus blessed, he offered his writings freely to the public: “I intend to deposit a collection of my minor works, in nineteen volumes, in the Franklin Philosophical Library . . . with the request that if any respectable person or persons, [be] disposed to republish any of them . . . they should be accommodated with a copy.” He seems to have retired then to simple living and continued occasional preaching, we suppose, until 1843, when the records of St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia inform us that he died in that city of the palsy on June 12 of that year, aged sixty-nine.

We have skipped very quickly over only a portion of Thomas Branagan’s long career. Perhaps we have seen enough of him and his philanthropic intention to write him down as, among other things,
something more than tentatively what better people than we have called a romantic. He had no patience with rules; he looked into his own heart, his own experience, and wrote; he used the first person confessional; he celebrated the goodness of primitive people and of unsophisticated ideas; the far-away and the horrible were favorite themes; he melted at the suffering of the poor; he yearned toward a good which transcended sense; he mixed rudely as a reformer into other people’s business; he was concerned with the education of children, of women, of the underprivileged; he did his best to write for the common people in what he could approximate of their language. If these, or any combination of these, are symptoms of the romantic fever, then Thomas Branagan had it badly—and here, in this country whose inhabitants are often said to have been immune to its ravages until many years later.

He was a radical, a devout Christian, a friend of the downtrodden. Like Philip Freneau, he signed himself proudly “one of the swinish multitude.” He believed with fervor that truth, as he saw it in his own heart, would make all men free, and that men were infinitely capable of progressing toward a more perfect state. Yet he was, like Freneau again, self-consciously an American, an outspoken literary nationalist, even a little petulant on the subject:

I do not expect that any thing I can produce, tho’ I was blessed with the astonishing talents of a Homer, and judgment of a Virgil, will command general attention in America, unless it was previously published and eulogized in England, and introduced as European manufacture. For I am morally certain that if Burns or Bloomfield had made their literary appearance in this commonwealth, neither of them would have found a single patron, or perhaps a bookseller to publish their poems.49

As a Christian, he had little good to say of the later writings of Thomas Paine, yet he agreed that “man, in certain parts of the United States, by the cunning craft of selfish priests, . . . is reduced to a poor dependant, bigoted, distorted, prejudiced, superstitious animal. . . .” He thundered against “college manufactured ministers” who “let the poor go to hell by the thousands,” who were “a set of artful swindlers, who impose upon the credulity of the ignorant.”50 Yet this, or any other evil need not be, for modern man,

49 Political and Theological Disquisitions, 12.
50 A Concise View, of the Principal Religious Denominations, in the United States of America (Philadelphia, 1811), 225, 231.
enlightened man, man freed of bonds of bigotry is "capable of a
degree of intellectual improvement, bordering on the celestial."\textsuperscript{51}

It was Thomas Branagan's mission, thus echoing Freneau, Thomas
Paine, and many another, even anticipating something of Emerson
and Whitman, to awaken his fellows to the possibility and the prac-
ticability of the recognition of truth as revealed in each man's heart.
He fervently reworded many of the ideas which stimulated better
men than he as they moved toward the intellectual renaissance which
was to dawn many years later, in the middle of the century. A simple
man, a good man, a man of intense feeling, of profound concern with
himself and his fellows, he caught at many notions which enlivened
his time, and he rewrote them as best he could for all men to read.
The trouble with Thomas Branagan and his admirable intention is
that, though he wrote fervently, he did not write well. He admitted
himself to be "desultory and inelegant." He grieved that he "at-
tended too much to the jingle of words."\textsuperscript{52} But, even admitting his
literary inadequacies, he disarms us. "Alas!" he said, "the world is
already too full of books, replete with golden lies. . . ."\textsuperscript{53} And what
is literary fame? "What is the approbation of poor perishing mortals
who will shortly be the food of worms?"

What are the plaudits of those depraved and partial critics, who eulogize
and render popular those intellectual murderers (who deserve the gibbet
more than the highway robber who only kills the body, while they destroy
the soul)? . . . What are the vociferated praises of millions of "stupid
starers" to one self-approving thought, begotten by conscious rectitude?\textsuperscript{54}

And whatever else we take away from Thomas Branagan, we cannot
deny him his "self-approving thought."

\textit{Columbia University} \hspace{2cm} \textbf{LEWIS LEARY}

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{The Charms of Benevolence}, 10.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{The Pleasures of Contemplation}, 14.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{The Charms of Benevolence}, 5. In his "Address to the Public" in \textit{Avenia} (1810 ed.), 15,
Branagan further apologizes for his "inelegance of composition": "Although I have written
much poetry, I absolutely disclaim the title of Poet. Nature alone can make one. There are
many who write verses in the commonwealth of literature, but few, very few of them are
poets. . . . There are many such boobies, who because they can write a few doggerel verses
. . . fancy themselves excellent proficients in the art. . . . In the present enlightened age, a
man must truly be an original genius, if he is ever to shine as a poet."

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{The Penitential Tyrant}, 4.