

# The Medium of Grace: Mutual Criticism in the Oneida Community

TARA M. MCCARTHY

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AMID THE NINETEENTH century's tumultuous developments in politics, religion, the economy, and the family, many reformers attempted to change the pattern of the world in which they lived. One such social architect, John Humphrey Noyes, established a religious commune at Oneida Creek, in upstate New York, in 1848. Noyes reacted to the selfishness he saw as embodied in the boom of nineteenth-century American capitalism with a plan for complete communism of property. He also viewed conventional marriage as a form of ownership. Through Complex Marriage, he attempted to replace the traditional patriarchal family structure with an extended family model in which all men, women, and children shared the same concept of union and collective responsibility.

The commitment to spiritual improvement bound men and women together in search of perfection. Individuals grew spiritually through participation in the system of Mutual Criticism. A close examination of community publications and private writings reveals the importance of Mutual Criticism in members' lives. Mutual Criticism enforced Oneida's communal definitions of love and family and outlined a new relationship between the sexes.

Mutual Criticism fulfilled several vital roles in the Oneida Community. Oneida had no laws or constitution. The community relied on Mutual Criticism to discipline those who strayed from the accepted pattern of behavior and to reincorporate them into community life. In addition to being the most important community institution, designed to protect and advance spiritual development, Mutual Criticism offered access to the fruits of Perfectionism to men and women. More than any other system at Oneida, Mutual Criticism fulfilled Noyes's promise to forge a new spirit of cooperation between the sexes in the service of God.

## Origins of Mutual Criticism

Noyes first discovered Mutual Criticism while attending Andover Theological Seminary. He joined a secret society, called the Brethren, in which members routinely criticized each other. At the meetings, the group plainly told a selected member his faults and pointed out areas for improvement. One of the Brethren recalled that during his twenty months of membership, his turn to be criticized came around only once, but "once was enough for a lifetime." He described the process as "severe and scathing in the extreme." However, he considered most of the remarks just and well intended and recalled weeping before God over the faults they had faithfully exposed to him.<sup>1</sup>

The Brethren traced the creation of Mutual Criticism to Williams College in 1808.<sup>2</sup> However, the inspiration for group criticism before that time is unknown. Scholars have compared the system of Mutual Criticism to the Chapter of Faults and cited Biblical texts to illuminate the importance of confession and criticism in the primitive church.<sup>3</sup> The Chapter of Faults was a form of public confession and group criticism practiced in monasteries and convents dating back to the ninth or tenth century. In her study of Catholic religious orders, Patricia Wittberg discovered that "the monastic model of religious virtuosity utilized more of these communal commitment mechanisms than did either the mendicant or the eremitic versions," and as a result was more successful at eliciting sustained commitment in its members. She explained that "deindividualizing mortification practices" served to "bolster their ideological commitment with both cathetic and utilitarian motives."<sup>4</sup>

Oneida Community members believed that the New Testament offered a precedent for Mutual Criticism and that the practice of criticism extended back "beyond the missionary and martyr age of Congregationalism to the missionary and martyr age of the Christian church." They acknowledged a debt to Congregationalism as the source of the modern version of Mutual Criticism but maintained that the spirit of criticism "is discernible every-where in the New Testament." Mutual Criticism cites several texts as evidence. For example,

1. *Mutual Criticism* (1876); reprinted, with an introduction by Barbara Benedict Bunker and Murray Levine (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975), 10. This book has no author listed but most of the contents come from articles and letters published in *The Oneida Circular* and the annual reports.

2. *Mutual Criticism*, 7.

3. Introduction to *Mutual Criticism*, viii; Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), 112.

4. Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 198-199.

Paul said to the Romans, "I am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." They also compared criticism to cleansing. Mutual Criticism was the community's interpretation of Christ's admonition to his disciples: "If I then your Lord and Master have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet."<sup>5</sup> Members believed that Mutual Criticism prepared them for the final judgment.

Noyes introduced Mutual Criticism at Putney and the practice continued with some modifications throughout Oneida's history. In the small and intimately acquainted Putney Community, the entire group administered criticism. Generally, members volunteered for the process, although the community might suggest a criticism. In extreme cases, criticisms were mandated. One of the members explained that the Putney group went through a long discipleship until the "Love for the truth and love for one another had nurtured and strengthened till it could bear any strain."<sup>6</sup> At Putney, a person offered himself or herself for criticism at the evening meeting. That person's character became the subject of careful scrutiny for all the members until the "trial" at the following evening's meeting.

During the criticism, each community member specified "as frankly as possible" everything that they found objectionable in the subject's character and conduct. The goal of a good criticism was to "point out the way of specific improvement" and to "produce humility and softness of heart, in which all good things grow."<sup>7</sup> Thus, the community valued fair and judicial critics for their skill and love of truth. However, criticism was more than a fault finding exercise. To close out a person's trial on a positive note, the "patient" received a round of commendations at the next meeting.<sup>8</sup>

As the community grew, the method of administering criticism introduced at Putney became less feasible. With the infusion of new members, individuals were not as intimately acquainted as the earliest members had been. Furthermore, the increase in membership rendered the practice of calling upon every member for criticism impractical. First, four of the most spiritual community members were appointed as judges to criticize all the members. Noyes criticized the judges and then sent them to investigate members. The panel discussed an individual's character and then invited him or her for an interview in which it plainly told of its findings and gave advice. In this strategy the judges

5. *Mutual Criticism*, 28,16. emphasis in original.

6. *Mutual Criticism*, 18,14.

7. *Mutual Criticism*, 22.

8. *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association*, (1 January 1849).

conversed freely with the individual.<sup>9</sup> However, this was not typical of the history of criticism at Oneida. Generally, the individual remained silent and passively accepted the critic's comments. Eventually the community adopted a standing committee of men and women, which was selected by the community and rotated every three months.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to its disciplinary uses, Mutual Criticism performed several other functions in the community. As a cleansing ritual for those who traveled outside the community, and a prescription for individuals in poor health, Mutual Criticism strengthened the ties of the community and the individual's resolve to improve. Members who broke community standards often confessed their transgressions and asked for criticism. In this way, Mutual Criticism combined several religious rituals such as confession and baptism with a therapeutic and humbling reaffirmation of community control. As one scholar points out: "The sessions appear to have exhibited a rising tension, a peak of struggle, followed by relief and release. The sense of catharsis made Mutual Criticism a therapeutic as well as a control mechanism."<sup>11</sup>

Philip Rieff identified the nineteenth century as a period of transition between communities bound by religion and a common sense of purpose and the emerging therapeutic society, in which freedom and individual expression reigned.<sup>12</sup> Oneida and many other nineteenth-century movements resisted the loss of communal and spiritual values. These groups designed positive communities, promising salvation to members through subordination to communal goals. This concept of the individual was built on the classical social tradition that the individual's sense of well-being depended on his or her participation in a community.<sup>13</sup>

### Functions of Mutual Criticism

Mutual Criticism played a vital role in maintaining the bond between individual and community. Because the good citizen represented the ideal in the Western tradition, the individual learned that he or she could only exercise individual gifts and powers fully through participation in collective life. Commitment therapies used this model to reintegrate subjects into the communal system. Rieff explained that

9. *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association* (1 January 1849).

10. *Mutual Criticism*, 17-18.

11. Michael Barkun, "The Visionary Experiences of John Humphrey Noyes," *The Psychohistory Review* 16 (Spring 1988): 326.

12. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 17-21.

13. Rieff, *Triumph*, 73, 71.

the function of the classical therapist was to commit the patient to the symbol system of the community by some accepted technique. Any sanctioned effort to reintegrate an individual into the communal symbol system constituted a commitment therapy.<sup>14</sup> In this strategy, the community was the ultimate corrective of personality disorders. Noyes demonstrated a keen awareness of the needs of the individual. Lawrence Foster points out that Noyes's attempts to abolish disease and death recognized the destruction of mental and emotional disorders, which he believed must be the first to be eliminated "if the 'King of Terrors' is eventually to lose his hold over the mind and spirit of man."<sup>15</sup>

Nervousness and depression were battled through Mutual Criticism. Harriet Matthews credited the community with saving her life and mental health. Before she joined Noyes and his followers, Matthews's pastor had pronounced her insane. She described herself as being in poor health and on the verge of insanity after an agonizing search for truth and righteousness. Matthews reflected, after twenty years in the community, that the atmosphere of faith, love, self-improvement, and self-control at Oneida brought her health and happiness.<sup>16</sup> The community cured through the individual's achievement of his or her collective identity.<sup>17</sup>

Mutual Criticism controlled individualism and pleasure-seeking, reinforced community behavioral standards, and fulfilled the role of government and spiritual guardian at Oneida. George Cragin believed that criticism cured "egotism, self-conceit and all forms of disagreeable diseases resulting from the fungus growth of individual sovereignty."<sup>18</sup> A description of Mutual Criticism published by the community emphasized the importance of this system to the success of the community and claimed that its usefulness in community life could hardly be over-estimated.

Mutual Criticism pervaded every aspect of Oneida society, fostered all improvement, and corrected all excesses among members. According to the community, criticism and communism bore a similar relationship to the judicial system in ordinary society.<sup>19</sup> The *First*

14. Rieff, *Triumph*, 68.

15. Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, The Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 111.

16. Marlyn Hartzell Dalsimer, "Women and Family In the Oneida Community, 1831-1881" (Ph.D. dissertation., New York University, 1975), 236, quoted from *The Oneida Circular* (7 November 1870).

17. Rieff, *Triumph*, 68, 70.

18. *Mutual Criticism*, 86.

19. *Mutual Criticism*, 79.

*Annual Report of The Oneida Association*, published in 1849, added that Mutual Criticism, since its introduction at Putney, had "been relied on for regulating character and stimulating improvement more than the meetings or any other means of influence."<sup>20</sup> Noyes also recommended widespread participation in Mutual Criticism as a means of spiritual revival. In December 1873, Noyes called upon the community to set aside work and pleasure to devote themselves to a revival of criticism. For months the "criticism clubs" were overwhelmed with applicants and one person waited almost three month for "the coveted washing." The previous year the community had also put aside labor and studies to engage in thorough criticism.<sup>21</sup>

Mutual Criticism, like the Chapter of Faults, was a communal commitment therapy. Commitment therapies oriented members to community standards, or returned individuals to the community through re-education and training for membership. The process was transformative. Through the therapy of an exemplary member, the individual internalized the values of the community.<sup>22</sup> A commitment therapy could be used to induct new members or to reform existing members based on collective needs. Mutual Criticism fulfilled both purposes.

In addition to being the central institution through which individuals sought spiritual improvement, Mutual Criticism was also the most participatory aspect of governance at Oneida. Both men and women held a valuable place in the system because both were expected to participate in giving and receiving criticism. An article in the community circular in 1850 explained: "Our government is democratic, inasmuch as the privilege of criticism is distributed among the whole body, and the power which it gives is accessible to anyone who will take pains to attain good judgment. It is aristocratic, inasmuch as the best critics have the most power. It is theocratic, inasmuch as the spirit of truth alone can give the power of genuine criticism."<sup>23</sup> By serving on the criticism committee or speaking up at a criticism given at the evening meeting, individuals of both sexes took part in the salvation of other community members. Men and women had access to criticism both as a means of advancing their own spirituality and contributing to the improvement of other community members.

Originally, the community devoted an occasional evening meeting to Mutual Criticism. At these sessions, "the conductor of exercises

20. Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography 1851-1876* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 133.

21. Robertson, *Oneida Community: Aan Autobiography*, 130,146-7.

22. Rieff, 76.

23. Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 134.

would call on each member present to express freely his or her views of the character under consideration."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, men and women participated equally in the judgment of their peers. Every member had the opportunity to speak during a criticism. In late 1848 the community adapted the procedure to its growing membership. The association appointed four of the "most spiritual and discerning critics," who were first criticized by John Humphrey Noyes, and then in the course of three weeks criticized every member. The four critics selected were George Cragin, Stephen Leonard, Harriet Noyes, and Harriet Skinner.<sup>25</sup> This pattern of selecting an equal number of men and women held a year later, when members organized into criticism clubs. The association divided into groups of about twelve people for the purpose of criticism and improvement. Noyes appointed the foremen, who drew lots for their members. Four people withheld from the groups to criticize the foremen. Two men, George Cragin and George Noyes, and two women, Mary Cragin and Harriet Noyes, served in this role.<sup>26</sup> Later, the community moved to a standing committee of ten to fifteen members but continued to appoint equal numbers of men and women.<sup>27</sup>

The system of criticism had rules of behavior for both critics and recipients. Critics were warned to beware of three impulses: the spirits of censure, flattery, and superficiality. "Some persons seem to consider criticism merely a keen and sharp delineation of faults, without any reference to corresponding virtues. Others make it consist in indiscriminate praise, passing over defects so lightly that they are lost sight of in view of the virtues. Others again seize on the external manifestations of character, and skim its surface without diving into its recesses." A good critic carefully balanced praise and reproof, thereby fostering improvement, not inflicting punishment. "Let it always be remembered that the object of criticism is not that the critics may unload themselves of grudges, but to help the person criticized—to improve his religious experience—to bring him nearer to God—to give him a new enjoyment of life."<sup>28</sup>

The community believed that Mutual Criticism preserved the social order in an appropriate and timely manner. Selfishness and disorder inevitably threatened the community. However, criticism gave the community a "peaceable method of bringing the truth to bear upon

24. *Mutual Criticism*, 17.

25. George Wallingford Noyes Papers, 36,36A.

26. Harriet Skinner to John Miller, 15 September 1849, George Wallingford Noyes Papers. Skinner only names two foremen, Mr. Burnham and Mr. Skinner.

27. Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia*, 85.

28. *Mutual Criticism*, 27,35.

the offender."<sup>29</sup> As a result, members had an outlet for solving problems rather than allowing them to fester and to cause social unrest. Critics resisted administering criticism in anger or for petty reasons. According to community doctrine, criticism was like a well-oiled machine; "Without the lubricant of love, criticism works more mischief and distress than it does good."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, members received praise as well as censure during a criticism.

For example, the Daily Journal's report of a man's criticism recounted only praise. "John Freeman was criticised [sic] in the meeting last night by his request but little fault was found with him, and he was commended for the earnest spirit he manifested in joining us, for his general good deportment, since, and for his industry and quietness."<sup>31</sup> At a particularly scathing criticism, Noyes commented, "This is a hard criticism but I endorse it, for I believe it to be true." At the next evening meeting, a letter from the criticized woman was read and the family commended her. Noyes had suggested that she be praised after such a severe criticism.<sup>32</sup>

### Practice and Benefits of Mutual Criticism

The members who received criticism also adhered to a strict code of conduct. They sat quietly, accepting their judgment passively and meekly. Outbursts and crying were unacceptable.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the love of truth prevented individuals from feeling personally wounded or unjustly treated. For example, one member recalled a criticism in which he was "strongly tempted to resent the remarks of one individual." This bothered him until he realized that "the bitter pill at which I was tempted to rebel, was the truest and best part of my criticism. It was the only thing in my criticism that had really mortified and wounded my self-conceit, and in that I saw was its supreme value."<sup>34</sup>

Once in front of a committee, a person's character and habits were completely open to criticism. Any aspect of the individual's life might be explored. For example, Mr. B's committee found his "utterance" labored, tedious, and awkward. Furthermore the committee agreed that he failed to fulfill his promises. He made excellent plans but never

29. *Mutual Criticism*, 24, 26.

30. *Mutual Criticism*, 29.

31. *Daily Journal* (21 September 1866).

32. *Oneida Journal* (2 February 1856); George Wallingford Noyes Papers.

33. *Mutual Criticism*, 37-39.

34. *Mutual Criticism*, 85.

executed the details. Another critic pointed out that Mr. B. was not neat in his personal habits. Miss E. received criticism for disrespect and inattention. Her critics found Miss E. too impulsive and criticized her propensity for laughing. The committee concluded that she must learn to be gay without being rude, and respectful without being demure. H. was criticized for being a poor critic. His fear of displeasing others impeded his instincts as a critic.<sup>35</sup> Still others were criticized for superficiality, narrow-mindedness, and vanity.<sup>36</sup> Any detail of a person's character invited scrutiny under this system. A committee once criticized Harriet Noyes for a deficiency in severity and advised her to scold occasionally.<sup>37</sup>

Not surprisingly, some members feared criticism. Charles Olds recorded his anxiety about criticism in his diary. A notice was posted calling the "inmates to assemble," and he thought it was to criticize him.<sup>38</sup> A letter to the *Daily Journal* echoed the same fear. L.F. Dunn wrote: "I wish to express my thankfulness to the family for their sincerity in criticizing me. I have realized as I never did before, that the truth, however mortifying it may be, is the only thing that can save me from my old life. I do not think that I ever truly appreciated criticism, but have stood in fear and dread of it."<sup>39</sup> On one occasion, when the women collectively offered themselves up for criticism, a member confided her fear to a friend. She reported that the women ate in silence, according to Paul's injunction, while the brethren told them their collective faults. Although she "hailed it as an open door of hope, hope of true reconciliation and mutual understanding between men and women," she confessed that her "flesh shrank from the possible and probable prospect of humiliation to us women."<sup>40</sup>

Other members testified to the effectiveness and pleasure of a good criticism. A letter to the *Daily Journal* expressed thanks to community friends for their "sincerity and kindness" during a recent criticism. The writer had never "fully appreciated the warm loving heart of the community" until this criticism.<sup>41</sup> After the break up of the community, one former member recalled the pain and satisfaction of his experience with criticism. Initially he felt that "Every trait of my character that I took any pride or comfort in seemed to be cruelly discounted; and after,

35. *Mutual Criticism*, 45, 54, 57.

36. *Mutual Criticism*, 46, 51, 53.

37. *Oneida Journal* (27 December 1855); George Wallingford Noyes Papers.

38. Charles Olds Diary, 12 September 1853, Oneida Community Collection.

39. *Daily Journal* (2 February 1867).

40. Beulah Hendee to Annie Hatch, 9 September 1878, Oneida Community Collection.

41. *Daily Journal* (15 October 1866).

as it were, being turned inside out and thoroughly inspected, I was metaphorically, stood upon my head, and allowed to drain till all the self-righteousness had dripped out of me." For weeks after this experience, he found himself reviewing various passages of his criticism and became convinced of the "justice of what at first my spirit had so violently rebelled against." This member wrote, years after the break-up, that he would give years of his life for one more criticism from John Humphrey Noyes.<sup>42</sup>

In response to this account of community life, Charlotte Leonard wrote, "When I think of our life there it seems to me like purity itself and I shall always regard it so. The life we lived of unselfish love for our brothers and sisters sometimes comes surging back to my mind and heart, and fills me with thankfulness. I look upon it as the most valuable part of my life." She agreed that Mutual Criticism was a positive experience: "Truly criticism was our best friend. How we used to feel that we had been *washed* and were clean."<sup>43</sup> The metaphor of washing was commonly used to describe criticism. Another community member testified to the cleansing power of criticism. "My experience with criticism has led me to look upon it as a great source of relief. People who are accustomed to be clean physically, are uncomfortable, not to say miserable, when they become befouled. They have a kind of self-loathing that nothing but a bath can remove. The desire for spiritual cleansing by criticism seems to me to be just as natural and instinctive."<sup>44</sup>

Members also compared criticism to the judgment fires. One man reported deep tribulation after having "been led to see more clearly than ever before, the hatefulness of a hard unbelieving heart." He expressed thanks and prayed that "the judgment fire will continue to burn until the old life is consumed, if it takes body and all."<sup>45</sup> Fidelity Burt wrote an apologetic letter to Noyes, which was read to the entire family. She confessed: "I know that the difficulty has all been in myself, and I wish to give myself up to the truth and judgment, to be cleansed of obstructions. I have been criticized justly, for independence and complacency, and now I say that I do not think I have had a true spirit of subordination to my superiors."<sup>46</sup> Community members believed

42. Allan Estlake, *The Oneida Community: A Record of An Attempt To Carry Out the Principles of Christian Unselfishness and Scientific Race Improvement* (London: George Redway, 1900), 67. Allan Estlake is a pseudonym for Abel Easton.

43. Charlotte M. Leonard to Abel Easton, undated, Oneida Community Collection. Emphasis in original.

44. *Mutual Criticism*, 85.

45. *Daily Journal* (19 February 1867).

46. *Daily Journal* (21 August 1866). Emphasis in original.

that criticism prepared them for the final judgment of God: "So far as we judge ourselves, and help one another to judgment, we shall escape present chastening by affliction and the condemnation of the final judgment."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, community members strove to accept judgment. Only by embracing the truth would Perfectionists achieve salvation.

Jessie Kinsley recalled that her religious training and "naturally reasonable disposition" made her eager to please and fearful of selfishness. She was "a little afraid to be especially happy over anything and often asked for criticism as a devout Catholic would go to confession."<sup>48</sup> These sessions threw her into "mental chaos." After she left the "friendly group of critics," Kinsley went off by herself to think and cry. Despite the anguish that these criticisms caused her, Kinsley stood by the results. Reflecting on the break-up, she acknowledged that the communalists suddenly grew selfish in many ways. Kinsley credited Mutual Criticism with taming selfish impulses in the community: "I wonder if there was not an afflatus, renewed through criticism (criticism that was almost always upbuilding rather than destructive) that made us go beyond ourselves —our natural selves— and took from us the desire for selfish rights and gave to us truly what was called the 'Pentecostal Spirit.'"<sup>49</sup>

Kinsley recognized the importance of Mutual Criticism in curbing individualistic tendencies at Oneida. The practice was also used to strengthen or renew commitment to the community. Prospective members had to demonstrate a willingness to accept criticism. Interested parties exchanged letters with Noyes and accepted his criticism before joining the community. Those who traveled outside the community often requested criticism before leaving or upon their return, to protect themselves from or to purge worldly influences. For example, when Mr. Easton left the community for a trip to New York, he requested a criticism and the advice of the community.<sup>50</sup> Businessmen also underwent "defumigation" when they returned from a business trip.<sup>51</sup> Oneidans were very cautious about their contact with the outside world, including their own hired help. Critics rebuked members for being too friendly with outsiders. For example, H. Blood was criticized

47. *Mutual Criticism*, 20.

48. Jessie Kinsley, *A Lasting Spring: Jessie Catherine Kinsley, Daughter of the Oneida Community*, ed. Jane Kinsley Rich (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983), 38.

49. Kinsley, *Lasting Spring*, 41.

50. *Oneida Circular Daily*, 24 June 1867.

51. Robert Fogarty, "Oneida: A Utopian Search For Religious Security," *Labor History* 14 (Spring 1973): 225.

for freedom with the hired men, and Daniel Abbott's bad experience was attributed, in part, to his association with an outside workman.<sup>52</sup>

### Mutual Criticism and Health

In addition to governing individual behavior and guarding against contamination from the outside world, criticism performed a vital role in physical health of the community. Noyes was influenced by the early Mesmerists in the 1830s. Noyes believed that a perfect society would be free of disease and death and that disease at Oneida represented the influence of evil. No doctor practiced at Oneida for roughly the first half of the community's life, until Theodore Noyes and another community son graduated from Yale in the 1860s. Illness, like a spiritual flaw, was treated with criticism. As much as the community prized Mutual Criticism for spiritual and moral effects, they also believed it had "hygienic agency." An individual suffering from minor ailments like a headache or toothache and members with more serious diseases such as malaria and diphtheria, all underwent criticism as part of their treatment. John Humphrey Noyes remained opposed to conventional medical treatments although some were eventually used, including vaccination.<sup>53</sup>

The Oneida Community's attitude toward disease reflected a nineteenth-century ambivalence toward the causes and cures of disease. Despite the secularization of American life and the advances in science and medicine, popular culture embraced movements such as phrenology, Mesmerism, and spiritualism in the mid-nineteenth century. In *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*, Robert Fuller argues that Mesmerism's appeal to an American audience derived from its identification with a moral and metaphysical context. The theory of animal magnetism was transformed from a system of medical healing to a "schema demonstrating how the individual mind can establish rapport with ever more sublime levels of reality." Thus, psychology and spirituality were linked in the Mesmerist vocabulary with the promise to bring the physical, mental, and religious spheres into a single comprehensive theory of human nature.<sup>54</sup> By the late 1850s, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, who began his career as a Mesmerist, taught that disease was a non-entity, a delusion.<sup>55</sup>

52. *Oneida Circular Daily* (4 June 1867); *Daily Journal*, 10 March 1866.

53. Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, 159.

54. Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 183, 54.

55. Frank A. Pattie, *Mesmer and Animal Magnetism: A Chapter in the History of Medicine* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company Publishers, 1909), 253, 262.

The Oneida Community used Mutual Criticism to combat physical symptoms which they believed were caused by spiritual disease. One member described the process of hygienic criticism: "It is a common custom here, for a person who may be attacked with any disorder, to apply this remedy by sending for a committee of persons, in whose faith and spiritual judgment he has confidence, to come and criticise him. The result when administered sincerely, is almost universally to throw the patient into a sweat and to bring on a reaction of his life against disease, breaking it up and restoring him soon to usual health." Community members testified to the value of this practice for all who had faith in Christ as a physician. For example, S.P. suffered from a bad cold and a run of fever until she tried the criticism cure and immediately found relief. Fear had caused her ailment. S.P. had been brought up with the bad habit of expecting to take cold with every exposure, and further anticipating a progression to a serious cough. These fears were realized until criticism stopped this cycle by breaking her fear and giving her "comparative security against future attacks."<sup>56</sup> This example illustrates the community belief that disease attacked a person because of spiritual or psychological weakness.

In a Home-Talk on "The Higher Hygiene," Noyes explained the importance of internal transformation to establish a connection to the eternal source of life, God. At Oneida, the key to health lay in the presence of God in each individual's heart, to purify and transform body and soul.<sup>57</sup> Community members believed that illness and death resulted from lack of faith. Harriet Noyes asked Fanny Leonard to help about getting a criticism committee for Mary Whatley, who had been "ailing for quite a while past; but has not wanted a committee. She had been advised to; but she said she 'thought folks were to go to God for themselves.'" Leonard felt assured that Whatley would find good results and not regret the move.<sup>58</sup> At one meeting, the case of Mr. Mallory was discussed. Mallory believed that the gift of healing had left the community, and chose to seek a doctor's care and advice. Several members expressed doubts about this course and thought he was dying of unbelief. The community appointed Henry Burnham and Theodore Noyes to talk to Mallory and advise him to seek criticism.<sup>59</sup>

The afflicted also recognized the contributions of other members to

56. *Mutual Criticism*, 71-73.

57. Alfred Barron and George Noyes Miller, eds. *Hometales*, vol. 1 (Oneida: Oneida Community, 1875), 52. Home-Talks were the speeches given by John Humphrey Noyes at evening meetings. These talks were recorded for use at future meetings or in community publications. Volume 2 was never published.

58. Fanny Leonard to Charlotte Leonard, 26 July 1878, Oneida Community Collection.

59. *Oneida Journal* (7-8, 23 December 1862); George Wallingford Noyes Papers.

the triumph over illness. One member credited the faith of two community women for her cure. She was attacked with violent pains in her head and stomach. However, she claimed that Mrs. Noyes's and Mrs. Whitfield's quiet faith in God taught her to look for help in the same direction that they did.<sup>60</sup> Another woman, who caught her hand in a clothes wringer, endured severe pain until community members helped her to overcome "a brooding influence of evil that she had come under." The community used "attention and faith," as well as private criticism, to help her conquer the pain of her injured hand.<sup>61</sup>

In the winter of 1863-1864, a diphtheria epidemic broke out in the community while Noyes was away. Several people died before they called in a physician. When Noyes returned, members reported that the physician spoke disrespectfully of Christ and he was dismissed. Noyes responded to the crisis with a discourse on faith at the evening meeting. He took a "thorough stand against the employment of doctors, old women's nursing, and drugs." Noyes admonished the community for not practicing a genuine faith cure and expressed his willingness to remain loyal to Christ in the place of physicians, even if half the community died. Noyes prescribed a combination of criticism and ice to treat the disease. One of the patients testified that the criticism "immediately threw me into a profuse sweat, till I felt as though I had been in a bath; and before the committee left the room, my head-ache, back-ache, and fever were all gone." The criticism separated the patient from the spirit of disease and promoted a cure.<sup>62</sup> Five of the sixty cases proved fatal, but no deaths occurred after the introduction of criticism and ice.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

Mutual Criticism held a vital role in community life. Members contributed to the regulation and improvement of the entire community's spiritual and physical health. Everyone participated. Although the most spiritual were considered the best critics, the community did not believe it hypocritical for one member to criticize another for faults which both possessed. "The feeling is very natural that we have no right to criticize an evil that we see in others unless we are free from it ourselves; and even when unrestricted criticism is invited there is sometimes a holding back on this account." However, this instinct

60. *Oneida Circular Daily* (28 Jan 1867).

61. Dalsimer, "Women and Family," 232.

62. *The Oneida Circular*, 4 April 1864. The idea for ice came from a newspaper article reporting its use by a French physician.

63. George Wallingford Noyes Papers, notes, September 1863.

harmed the purpose of criticism: to find the truth. A critic's "infirmity" did not excuse him or her from the duty to expose faults in others or devalue his or her judgment in the eyes of the community.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, despite the hierarchical organization of Oneida society, Mutual Criticism advanced an egalitarian model for spiritual salvation. Anyone could contribute to one's own perfection and the salvation of others through the system of Mutual Criticism.

Mutual Criticism, and the principles of truth, improvement, loyalty, and submission which it advanced, filled a central need in community life. Mutual Criticism was a commitment therapy. Members internalized community values and identified with communal goals through their participation. In matters of religion, government and health, criticism provided social and spiritual strength and nurturance to the community. Mutual Criticism also provided women with the opportunity to participate fully in the community's spiritual life. Although women accepted a subordinate role in other aspects of Oneida society, Noyes recognized their spiritual contributions through criticism. The system gave each member access to the spiritual aid of the community and the opportunity to contribute to the physical and spiritual health of the group. Members strived to create a perfect society, free from selfishness, jealousy, and pain. Mutual Criticism was the primary means of improvement at Oneida and an indispensable part of men's and women's lives.

64. *Mutual Criticism*, 32.