

# populist themes in the fiction of ignatius donnelly

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Ignatius Donnelly, at some point or other in his life, was a land speculator, a Congressman, an author, a lecturer on various topics and an inveterate political orator. A Democrat or a Republican, depending on the circumstances, he espoused nearly every reform cause of the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, he was instrumental in the formation of the People's Party. He was, in short, an enigmatic man of many talents and interests.<sup>1</sup>

Donnelly terminated his career as a Philadelphia lawyer in 1856, moving to Nininger, Minnesota, to engage in land speculation. In a short time he made a fortune, then lost everything when Nininger City collapsed in the panic of 1857. His dreams of economic success shattered, he entered politics. A Democrat in Philadelphia, he became an open supporter of the young Republican party in Minnesota. He was elected lieutenant governor in 1859 after two defeats in bids for the state senate. Then, in 1863, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives, serving three terms, during which his principal activity was the securing of favors for western railroads. After alienating Republican party leaders in Minnesota, he was not nominated for a fourth term. This was the first of many disappointing political setbacks for Donnelly and thereafter he became a political maverick. He was defeated in subsequent bids for Congress, running as an independent in 1868 and as an independent endorsed by the Democrats in 1870. An outspoken Granger during the 1870's, he was instrumental in molding the People's Anti-monopoly Party in Minnesota, and was elected in 1873 to the state senate on this ticket. Also in the 1870's he became an enthusiastic supporter of greenbackism. He was again defeated for Congress in 1878, endorsed by both the Greenback Party and the Democrats. This defeat

forced Donnelly into his longest period of retirement from politics, during which time he launched a literary career.

Donnelly wrote three books during the 1880's, which, if nothing else, established him as a literary as well as a political maverick.<sup>2</sup> In *Atlantis* he argued, with Plato, that a large island had once existed in the mid-Atlantic where civilization had originally developed. When the island eventually sank, only a few escaped, some to America and others to Europe. He argued in his second book, *Ragnarok*, that the deposits of clay, gravel and silt on the surface of the earth had resulted from a comet. In the third, *The Great Cryptogram*, he attempted to prove, by means of a complex cipher, that Bacon wrote the plays of Shakespeare. He travelled to England in 1888, lecturing at both Cambridge and Oxford on the subject. Returning to the United States in 1889, he experienced a humiliating defeat in a bid for the United States Senate. During the next three years he wrote three novels.<sup>3</sup>

Donnelly had been active in the newly formed Farmers' Alliance in Minnesota during the 1880's and by 1890 had gained control of the Alliance. He attended the Cincinnati convention in 1891 and was a member of the platform committee at the St. Louis convention in February of 1892. The preamble of the platform of the People's Party, adopted on July 4, 1892, by the Omaha Convention, was Donnelly's creation. Often mentioned as a possible presidential candidate for the new party, he instead received the gubernatorial nomination in Minnesota. He ran third. Although reluctantly supporting Bryan in 1896, he was skeptical of the Populist fusion with the Democrats. In 1900 he received the vice-presidential nomination from the enfeebled People's Party. This was his last campaign, for he died January 1, 1901.

Depending on one's point of view, Ignatius Donnelly was either the Sage of Nininger or the Don Quixote of Minnesota. Historians' interpretations of Donnelly generally have depended on their judgment of Populism itself, whether it was forward looking or reactionary. Donnelly has, of course, been dealt with by most major interpreters of Populism, but his fiction, except for *Caesar's Column*, has received scant attention. His novels, however, are important, for they not only reveal much about Donnelly himself, but also contain social and economic themes which, taken as a whole, present his indictment of late nineteenth-century America. And, since Donnelly was a founder and a leader of the People's Party, perhaps his fiction casts some light on the nature of Populism as well.

His first novel, by far the most widely read of the three, was *Caesar's Column*, published in 1890. It is the story of Gabriel Weltstein of Uganda, Africa, and his visit to New York City in the year 1988. Written in the form of an antiutopian novel, it describes how the defects of the industrial society of 1888 develop to their full destructive expression in 1988.<sup>4</sup> Donnelly transports the reader into the future by describing the

technological wonders of the late twentieth century. Arriving in New York by airship, Gabriel sees the illumination of the city's lights a hundred miles away. Electric power, deriving from the magnetism of the earth itself, makes night no different from day. From the raised, glass covered sidewalks, Gabriel views the electric powered trains, and at the plush Darwin Hotel technology provides every possible comfort. Gabriel, although astounded by this great scientific advance, quickly perceives that the people are different. All have the same cold look and are molded into "the same soulless likeness." The women, bold and immodest in their behavior, "held intercourse with your soul." It is a race "without heart or honor."<sup>5</sup>

Thus Donnelly sets the scene for Gabriel's adventures in New York. The second day Gabriel saves an old beggar from the wheels of a carriage, narrowly escaping arrest for this interference with a vehicle of the Plutocracy. Later he discovers that the beggar is a wealthy young man in disguise—Maximillian by name—who is a leader in a world-wide secret society (The Brotherhood of Destruction), sworn to the destruction of the ruling capitalist Plutocracy. The president of the Brotherhood in the United States is Caesar. The leader of the Plutocracy, the true ruler of the United States, Prince Cabano, is aided by a small group of fabulously rich capitalists—the council of the Oligarchy. The thoroughly impoverished working class makes up the majority of the population. The Brotherhood, having manufactured a sufficient number of high powered rifles to arm the laborers, has prepared well for the revolution. The only obstacle, the highly-paid "Airforce" armed with deadly bombs of poisonous gas, is removed when General Quincy accepts a bribe from the Brotherhood, after discovering a treacherous plot on the part of the Oligarchy to replace him and his men.

The revolt begins at the appointed time. After the "Airforce" has destroyed the army of the Oligarchy, the mob slaughters the rich, allowing none to escape, for it can conceive of nothing but revenge and carnage. The Oligarchy destroyed, Caesar goes mad with power. He is the ruler! Since 250,000 corpses posed a health hazard, he orders a pyramid to be made of cement and bodies—a monument to the revolt. Caesar's Column! But, even with the Oligarchy destroyed, the mob still hunts blood. Turning on their own leaders, they murder Caesar. Gabriel, Maximillian, and their families barely escape in an "Airforce" airship. Donnelly did not carry his antiutopia to its logical conclusion. Having arrived in Uganda, Gabriel and Maximillian form a utopian republic, where civilization would be given a second chance.

In a prefatory note to the public, Donnelly denied that he desired the overthrow of civilization. His only purpose was to show the rich and powerful that their indifference to the suffering of their fellow man, and their "blind, brutal and degrading worship of mere wealth, must—given time and pressure enough—eventuate in the overthrow of society and the

destruction of civilization.” (8) Society already had formed into two irreconcilable camps. What could prevent armed conflict? Thus Donnelly meant the novel to be both a warning and a prophecy—*Caesar's Column* was inexorably didactic. The novel dealt with the moral and social evils which Donnelly saw resulting from the capitalistic society of 1888. As these social deficiencies were intensified throughout the twentieth century, the social tension also would heighten until there would be class war. If the inequities of industrial society were not adjusted, man would destroy himself. The problems which Donnelly described in 1888 were the intensified social injustices of 1888.

Therefore, the basic theme is Donnelly's conviction that civilization, in its technological and economic expression, debases human nature. In spite of all the technological advance, civilization is a failure for the seventy percent of the human race who are underclothed and underfed; only the upper crust of society reaps the benefits of civilization. (35) Civilization “means happiness for a few thousand men and inexpressible misery for hundreds of millions.” (172) Man has forgotten his Creator. It is incomprehensible to Gabriel “that men can penetrate farther and farther into nature with their senses, and leave their reasoning faculties behind them. Instead of mind recognizing mind, dust simply perceives dust. This is simply the suicide of the soul.” (177) The masses also have been affected: “They do not mean to destroy the world; they will reform it—redeem it. They will make it a world where there shall be neither toil nor oppression. But poor fellows! Their arms are more potent for evil than their brains for good. They are omnipotent to destroy; they are powerless to create.” (258)

The most striking description of the effects of civilization on human nature is found in the chapter: “A Sermon of the Twentieth Century.” At the church, a palatial structure adorned by nude statues of ancient mythical gods, ushers are placed at the door to keep the poorly dressed from entering, “for it was evident that this so-called church was exclusively a club-house of the rich.” (178) As at the Darwin Hotel, the women are all beautiful with a soulless and sensual expression. During the sermon, the young lady seated next to Gabriel draws closer and looks into his eyes “with a gaze which no son of Adam could misunderstand.” (185) The sermon itself demonstrates Donnelly's aversion to the doctrine of Social Darwinism. The minister avers that nature “is as merciless as she is prolific. . . . The plan of Nature necessarily involves cruelty, suffering, injustice, destruction, death.” (182-183) Applying this role of nature to society, he asks, “Why should we concern ourselves about the poor? They are part of the everlasting economy of human society. Let us leave them in the hands of Nature. She who made them can care for them.” (184) Donnelly felt that this attitude would result from the complete indifference of the monied class which he detected in his own society. Indeed, the sermon strongly suggests that Donnelly be-

lieved that the principles of Social Darwinism were themselves responsible for the corruption of human nature and the inequities of industrial society. Although never referring explicitly to Social Darwinism, the sermon and the reference to the Darwin Hotel would seem to indicate such an attitude on Donnelly's part. To be sure, the Darwin was named "in honor of the great English philosopher of the last century." (10) But the people in the hotel had been rendered less than human by this civilization. The name was fitting for a palatial hotel which housed the few rich, the "fittest" of society.

The second social theme concerns the individuals who have clawed their way to the top in this corrupting society—Prince Cabano and his cohorts. Here Donnelly saw a conscious conspiracy on the part of the very rich. The institutions of justice—"courts, judges, and juries—are the merest tools of the rich. The image of justice has slipped the bandage from one eye, and now uses her scales to weigh the bribes she receives." The ordinary citizen has no recourse. In addition, "the newspapers are simply the hired mouthpieces of power; . . . their influence is always at the service of the highest bidder." (28) When Gabriel visits the palace of Prince Cabano, Rudolph, ostensibly a trusted servant of the Prince but in reality a member of the Brotherhood, shows Gabriel the council room. He explains:

This is the real center of government of the American continent; all the rest is sham and form. . . . Here political parties, courts, juries, governors, legislatures, congresses, presidents are made and unmade; and from this spot they are controlled and directed in the discharge of their multifunctions. The decrees formulated here are echoed by a hundred thousand newspapers, and many thousands of orators; and they are enforced by an uncountable army of soldiers, servants, tools, spies, and even assassins. He who stands in the way of the men who assemble here perishes. He who would oppose them takes his life in his hands. (62-63)

Donnelly thus projected the conspiracy of the Plutocracy of 1888 one hundred years into the future. Composed mostly of bankers and capitalists, the Plutocracy has conspired to subvert government and justice to their own interests, whereby the crushed masses are at their mercy. In connection with this conspiracy view of history, Donnelly has been accused of anti-Semitism.<sup>6</sup> Many passages in *Caesar's Column* appear to corroborate this charge. Prince Cabano's true name is Jacob Isaacs. In fact, "The aristocracy of the world is now almost altogether of Hebrew origin," which is a natural result of the biological principle of the survival of the fittest. Only the very strong and intelligent could possibly have survived the fierce persecution by Christians. "Like breeds like; and now the Christian world is paying in tears and blood, for the sufferings inflicted by their bigoted and ignorant ancestors upon a noble race."

They have now become the richest and are “as merciless to the Christian as the Christian had been to them.” (32) The true rulers in Europe also are bankers—mostly Jews. (97) Moreover, the second in command of the Brotherhood is a Jew, who, during the confusion of the revolt, flees to Judea with one hundred million dollars. There he proposes to rule from Jerusalem a revived Jewish nation. (283) Obviously Donnelly’s anti-Semitism was highly ambivalent and closely related to his whole conspiracy view of history. Norman Pollack argued that the anti-Semitism in *Caesar’s Column* was insignificant, that “only four out of 184 newspaper reviews . . . mentioned anti-Semitism.” He admitted that this does not “prove that anti-Semitism is absent from the book.”<sup>7</sup> One might ask what it does prove, unless it is indicative of a pervasive American anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century. C. Vann Woodward pointed to such non-Populist anti-Semitism in the 1890’s and concluded, “The Populists’ use of the Shylock symbol was not wholly innocent, but they used it as a folk stereotype, and little had happened in the Anglo-Saxon community between the time of Shakespeare and that of the Populists that burdened the latter with additional guilt in repeating the stereotype.”<sup>8</sup> John Higham, in an excellent treatment of the subject, further clarified the meaning of Populist anti-Semitism: “Just as Wall Street provided an *institutional* symbol of that plutocracy, so the Jews stood not only for plutocracy in general but also for the power of gold in particular.” Yet, this anti-Semitic feeling violated the Populists’ own motivating democratic principles. “As a result, the reformers displayed a divided state of mind that defies easy classification.”<sup>9</sup> This interpretation fits Donnelly like a glove. It is difficult to point to an overt type of anti-Semitism in *Caesar’s Column* because of this inner conflict between Donnelly’s feelings for the Jews and his commitment to democratic principles. Because the Jew is a scapegoat—an ethnic symbol of Plutocracy—Donnelly’s anti-Semitism was intellectualized and highly ambivalent.<sup>10</sup>

This, in broad strokes, was Donnelly’s indictment of capitalist society in 1888. The common man was the victim of the system. The system was controlled by the Plutocracy, and the Jewish “money power” justified the system with the doctrines of Herbert Spencer. The end result of this could only be the destruction of civilization itself. However, Donnelly was no mere prophet of doom. He also offered a solution. In one chapter (“Gabriel’s Utopia”) Gabriel explains to Max how he would reform the world. Basic to Donnelly’s whole social philosophy was his view of government as “merely a plain and simple instrument, to insure to every industrious citizen not only liberty, but an educated mind, a comfortable home, an abundant supply of food and clothing, and a pleasant happy life.” (306) Since “government is only a machine to insure justice and help the people,” it can adjust the institutions of society to benefit the many rather than the few. The first such adjustment would be to abolish interest on loans. For, if a small group of men

are given a financial advantage over the rest, however slight, they will in time possess all the wealth. Moderate wealth gained by industry, strength and foresight is good, but a maximum for both wealth and land should be set. The surplus could be utilized by the government in public works. In addition, silver and gold should be abolished as the basis of money. "The adoration of gold and silver is a superstition of which the bankers are the high priests and mankind the victims." Establish an international greenback currency, and there would be universal prosperity. (101-108)

Most of these ideas are utilized in the good society which Gabriel and Max establish in Africa, as described in the last chapter ("The Garden in the Mountains"). They institute a somewhat platonic republic, in which the most heinous crime is treason against the state, which includes bribery and corruption. The state establishes universal, compulsory education, abolishes all interest on money, limits wealth and land and provides medical care for everyone. Thus the problems of society are solved by use of government power for the welfare of all the people. (299-309)

In addition to these major themes, there are some less easily discernible minor themes in *Caesar's Column*, which may provide a clearer understanding of both Donnelly and Populism. Two related, somewhat concealed, stresses in the novel suggest that his model and goal was an idealized version of preindustrial American society. His other fiction will add further evidence. Donnelly displayed a certain nostalgic feeling for a past golden age which had been ruined by industrial capitalism. "There was a golden age once in America—an age of liberty; of comparatively equal distribution of wealth; of democratic institutions. Now we have but the shell and semblance of all that. We are a Republic only in name; free only in forms." (45) This golden age was the age of the free yeoman farmer who possessed the old republican virtues. During the carnage and destruction of the revolt, Gabriel speaks for Donnelly:

It was a dreadful night. Crowds of farmers from the surrounding country kept pouring into the city. They were no longer the honest yeomanry who had filled, in the old time, the armies of Washington, and Jackson, and Grant, and Sherman, with brave patriotic soldiers; but their brutalized descendants—fierce serfs—cruel and bloodthirsty peasants. Every man who owned anything was their enemy and their victim." (280)

This effect of industrial society and the rule of the Plutocracy could only be reversed by eradicating the cause—thus Donnelly's reforms.

Donnelly also displayed a distinct aversion to the city and idealized the country. Max falls in love with Christina, a girl from a very poor family. He buys a farm for her family so they can again be self-supporting. It seems to Max that "these plain, good people would be much happier in the country than in the city. . . . They had country blood in

their veins. . . . And a city, after all, is only fit for temporary purposes—to see the play and the shops and the mob—and wear one’s life out in nothingness.” (225) Christina’s entire family is transformed. They are once again happy and, more important, self-sufficient—what a contrast to the crowded city “with its poverty, its misery, its sin, its injustice, its scramble for gold, its dark hates and terrible plots.” (235)

Thus did Donnelly imply that his radical program of reform had little in common with socialism.<sup>11</sup> The means may have been similar, but the goal was quite different. He wanted to modify industrial society to conform as closely as possible to his idealized version of ante-bellum America. He yearned for the day of the honest yeoman farmer, for the age when industry had been in the hands of the small, independent entrepreneur, and for the time before the crowded, ugly cities had marred the landscape. Although Donnelly knew it was impossible to make society revert to a preindustrial age, he did hope for an adjustment of capitalist society so that it would encourage these old republican virtues of a bygone society. He felt that this could only be accomplished through the powerful instrument of government. Therefore, although this means to reform was radical and progressive, the end which Donnelly perceived was conservative and nostalgic. This opinion that the means, however radical, were only instruments to effect Donnelly’s ideal republican society will be reinforced in the examination of *The Golden Bottle*.

*The Golden Bottle* is a tale about Ephraim Benezet, a consumptive farmboy from a poverty-stricken Kansas family. The family of Sophie Hetherington, his childhood sweetheart, already has been evicted by foreclosure, and the same fate is imminent for the Benezets. Ephraim, very concerned about the situation, can do nothing. But one night he has a vision, in which an old man, the Pity of God, gives him a bottle which will make gold out of ordinary metal. Having made a fortune in gold, he and his father sell the gold in Kansas City for \$50,000. Then Ephraim decides that he has been chosen to alleviate the burden of the poor farmer, whose trouble mostly stems from high mortgage rates. Hiring Mr. Hayes, a poor and honest lawyer, Ephraim offers interest rates of two percent per annum on mortgages, thus infuriating the entire moneyed and professional community which has been growing rich on high interest rates. Ephraim, forced to move to Philadelphia to escape their ire, makes one million more in gold for his philanthropic venture.

Uppermost in his mind is his idea to find Sophie, who had moved to Omaha with her parents. Having found her, he is relieved to discover that she has not fallen into prostitution as he had heard, but has resisted in spite of the pressures of poverty and society. After they are married, she organizes the women workers in Omaha into cooperative units for the manufacture and sale of their products, thus avoiding the middle man and his profits.

Back in Philadelphia, Ephraim hears from Hayes that his plan has made Butler County, Kansas, an island of prosperity. With this to fortify his argument, Ephraim presents his scheme to Congress—it should enact legislation making available land loans at two percent and issue paper money of \$50 per capita. After a long battle with the Plutocracy, he is able to push his plan through Congress. Then he organizes “The Brotherhood of Justice” to fight the Plutocracy and to further justice and equality.

Nominated by the People’s Party, he is elected to the Presidency. Europe, fearing his radical reforms, prepares for war. But President Benezet takes the offensive for democracy. Canada is taken with a relatively small force, a treaty is made with Mexico and Ireland liberated. The people rejoice in their new freedom. The English revolt and liberate themselves. Ephraim then personally leads his forces against Emperor Wilhelm and his army. The Germans, although courageous fighting men, love liberty too much—on the third day of the battle they refuse any longer to fight for their masters. Finally Hungary and Austria revolt. All Europe is free, except Russia, where all the ruling aristocracy of Europe has fled. After the United Republics of Europe has been formed, with Ephraim as its provisional President, a huge army of freedom prepares for the battle of Armageddon with Russia. Although the fighting is fierce, the Millennium is ushered in with the victory of liberty. Finally, a universal Republic is formed, a world government with limited powers to keep the peace. Ephraim’s reform program meets with universal acceptance.

Ephraim, hearing the sound of a hammer, awakens to find a foreclosure notice tacked to the side of his Kansas home. It all has been a dream! In his despair, another vision appears. The visitor instructs him to go to work, to write out his dream, and to do what he can.

Several themes stand out in bold relief, but the importance of man’s environment for his social behavior was the fundamental emphasis in *The Golden Bottle*. Although human nature is good, the environment, the institutions of society, deprave and brutalize man. Poverty is the most devastating social evil. Lift the specter of starvation and the best in human nature will assert itself. Sophie’s rehabilitation of the working women in Omaha is a case in point. Driven by poverty, the working woman is forced to solicit in the streets. Starvation wages make her weak and ill. Because of society “she falls into sin, she becomes a merciless hunter of men, armed with the poisoned darts of disease and death.” (98) As a result of Sophie’s cooperative program, all this is changed. The women receive “whatever value their labor has added to the articles.” (94) The experiment “was sort of a practical communism, but one not ignoring independent individualism.” Both the appearance of the women and their character improve, and, in fact, the local brothels are forced to import women from other cities. (102-103) In other words,

change the economic institutions of society and human nature will be reformed. The legislation which Ephraim pushes through Congress effects a similar change. Crime all but disappears from the land: drunkenness and begging are unknown. "The whole moral nature of the people changed. They began to see that they had something to thank God for. It had been difficult indeed to worship God while the devil ruled the world." (154)

Obviously this transformation could only occur by breaking the stranglehold of the money power or Plutocracy. The aura of conspiracy pervades the novel. The Plutocracy, composed of Wall Street, the banking interests and the capitalists, has conspired against the people. Ephraim demands, "Which is more important—Wall Street or the country; the money of the country or the people of the country; a financial theory or mankind?" (142) Not only has the Plutocracy conspired in America, but also in Europe. In reaction to Ephraim's economic reforms the bankers of Europe "entered into a conspiracy to stop the progress of events. . . ." (248)

In the United States the Plutocracy uses every means at its command to maintain their power. After Ephraim's initial appeal to Congress, the newspapers, both Republican and Democratic, criticize his reforms as impractical and ruinous to the financial strength of the nation. Little had he realized that the "Plutocracy was not yet conquered; . . . that it possessed weapons in its great armory of which the common people knew nothing." (132) Finally, in order to take possession of the Presidency, Ephraim has to buy every New York newspaper, for the editors would look favorably on his program only if he were paying their salaries. Joseph Whitlock, a recent graduate of Yale College, is now delighted to level his attack on the Plutocracy. (189-193)

The Plutocracy controls the government as well as the mass media. After Ephraim had flooded the gold market, the money power begins scheming to demonetize gold and remonetize silver. Since that would destroy Ephraim's power to do good, he must stop them. Discovering how much Wall Street had paid the lobbyists "to buy up Congress," Ephraim offers them twice as much to kill the bill in the Senate. (177) Later, the incumbent President is bribed to help keep Ephraim out of office. (185)

Precisely what economic reforms did Donnelly deem necessary to break the power of the Plutocracy? The Plutocracy used two basic instruments to oppress the people. The first was usury. When Ephraim offers loans on farm mortgages at two percent, the local banker wants him to invest it at forty-five percent. Ephraim replies: "There is no man in Kansas can pay such a rate. It simply means ruin to the borrower, and the transfer of the property of the many into the hands of the few; the reduction of the people to serfdom and the overthrow of free institutions. Why the farmer cannot pay . . . six per cent. The

mortgaged farm is, in nine cases out of ten, a lost farm.” (53-54) Ephraim’s offer raises considerable opposition, for “merchants, doctors, lawyers, clergymen, in fact all parties, charge high rates of interest on every dollar due them.” (56) Donnelly also flayed the advocates of hard money. Low interest loans broke the usurers. The issuing of paper money of \$50 per capita would stun Wall Street. He argues that since money is simply barter, the worship of metal is barbarian superstition. Ephraim proposes that paper money be issued and be given a value by the fiat of government. One duty of government is to make available an adequate supply of money. Then the people could do business on a cash basis. The result would be full national prosperity. (53-56)

Once these basic reforms had been instituted, further correctives were possible. Ephraim, concerned about the laboring man as well as the farmer, erects model communities along a transcontinental railroad he had built. The workers are assured of adequate housing, free recreation and medical care, and cheap transportation. Only manufacturers who agree to a profit sharing plan for the workers are allowed to build factories. Ephraim’s railroad charges only one cent per mile for travel and equally low rates for freight. This breaks the pools and dries out the watered stocks. “Jay Gould went out and hung himself. And all the people said—Amen!”<sup>12</sup> The Plutocracy was crushed. (164-172)

These reforms had to be effected by the government, the structure of which unfortunately favored Plutocracy rather than the people. In his speech to Congress, Ephraim reminds the legislators that they had been elected to uphold the Constitution, the object of which is “*to promote the general welfare.*” (131) Elsewhere, he asks, “Are not the *people* of more importance than continent or constitution?” (143) Continuing, he suggests that a two house legislature only gives Plutocracy two chances to control legislation. If they fail in Congress, “there sits, above both, a king called a President, with power to annul the action of both.” If all three should resist “the moneyed aristocracy,” the Supreme Court, “a lot of lawyers, mainly selected by the great corporations,” has the power to nullify everything. In short, there is “liberty with despotism in its belly.” (145-146)

Related to this theme of governmental corruption in the United States was Donnelly’s nativism, so evident in the novel. He characterized Europe as despotic and militaristic. Although Ephraim advocates anti-immigration laws and diplomatic isolation from the “corpse” of Europe, he is fully sympathetic with the people’s battle against monarchy. He avers, “The doctrines of 1776 will yet extend over all the continents and all the islands of the sea.” (200-205) The war with Europe was for humanity and democracy. The oppressed of Europe welcomed America, the liberator, with open arms, except for the fortress of autocracy—Russia. With Russia conquered the whole world became one great democracy. This was the battle of the ages, “between liberty and des-

potism." (207) America was the stone cut out without hands in the prophecy of Daniel, ordained to destroy the ten toes of the image of despotism.<sup>13</sup> (253)

In passing it may be noted that there was little trace of anti-Semitism in this novel. In fact, before leaving Europe, Ephraim "restored Palestine to the Jews." Donnelly referred to them as a "noble race" which had been unjustly persecuted. (280)

Finally, the question must again be asked: what result did Donnelly desire from this radical reform program? The same nostalgic desire for the good old days of the free yeomanry as was detected in *Caesar's Column* can be found in Ephraim's speech to Congress. The farmer, forced into debt by high interest rates, is soon swept from his farm, and there are no more free lands in the world. "Where sturdy yeomanry once raised stalwart boys and girls, . . . a cringing tenantry eats its bread in shame and submission. . . . The poor man's nation, the yeoman's republic" is perishing. The land is passing from the many into the hands of the few. Once the land is lost, "there goes with it dignity, prosperity, happiness, independence, civilization, republican institutions." (127) Donnelly also proposed to make labor freer, more prosperous, and, significantly, more entrepreneurial in nature by means of cooperative ownership of industry and profit sharing.

*Dr. Huguet*, Donnelly's second novel in point of time, has been reserved until last because it is a less overtly populist tract than the other two novels. Dr. Huguet, a native of South Carolina of Huguenot ancestry, is a cultured, educated physician. A natural leader of society, an aristocrat, reserved, refined, and a true Southerner, he lives in his ancestral house in the best section of town. A bachelor, he is in love with Mary, the daughter of Colonel Ruddiman, who had been financially ruined by the Civil War. Mary, both beautiful and a true intellectual, persuades Huguet to run for Congress, though previously he stood aloof from public life. In a later conversation with the Colonel and some neighbors, including Lawyer Buryhill the shrewd Yankee, Huguet espouses quite liberal ideas about Negroes. Mary, concerned about his political future, urges him to conceal his advanced views on the subject, to which he reluctantly agrees.

That very night he has a dream, a vision of the Christ, surrounded by millions of dark hands folded as in prayer. Astonishingly, the next morning he discovers that he has become a Negro. He is Sam Johnson, the most despised Negro in the community. His soul and brain are in Johnson's body, and Sam's soul in Huguet's body. Huguet is able to convince only Ben, his faithful Negro servant, of this fact. Everyone else is sure that Sam is insane.

After a period of despondency, Huguet decides that God has chosen him to help the Negro. He resolves that even in Sam's body he can win the battle of prejudice with Huguet's intellect. But his dark skin pre-

cludes any success. He is unable to find acceptable employment despite his education and culture. Ultimately he finds his mission, becoming the preacher-educator of "Nigger Hollow." Every night he fills the converted barn where he holds his lectures. Nearly one half of his congregation is from the respectable white community, which approves of his efforts. The Negroes, on the other hand, are convinced that this is not Sam Johnson, but someone in his body, sent from God. However, the disreputable whites are violently hostile. Loudest of all is Sam Johnson in Huguet's body. One night they burn the barn and slaughter the Negroes inside. Sam (in Huguet's body) murders Huguet (in Sam's body). Immediately Huguet returns to his own body. Sam Johnson had shot himself!

What does this fantastic plot reveal of Donnelly's social thought? Of course, the main theme is the race question, with which Donnelly's ideas on science are intimately related. Huguet, in his discussion with the Colonel, asserts that all Europeans were of two stocks, dark and light, and that "the real differences of men depended on their environment and conditions." (52) He denies the allegation that the Negro is a simian, a link between the white race and the animals. Undoubtedly the Negro is inferior to the White, but he may become equal at a future time, under favorable conditions. (53-56) The Negro does not have the intellectual capacity of the white races because "the sutures of the skull close at an earlier age than those of other races, and the thick skull, thus becoming solid, arrests the growth of the brain." This is "an effort of nature to protect the brain from the intense rays of the tropical sun." As a matter of fact, the first Europeans were Negroes: "The Neanderthal skull . . . is strikingly negroid. If this theory is correct, the white man is, to some extent, a climatically modified negro."<sup>14</sup> (57-58) Earlier he had opined that the "white man is but a bleached negro." (54) Continuing, he argues that the Negro should have political equality, though this does not suggest social, physical, moral or race equality. (60) Nor does it imply that they should rule, for "the intellect of the South should rule the South." But surely the superior white can control the ignorant black man without murdering him. (85)

After appropriating Sam Johnson's body, Huguet becomes somewhat disillusioned. He had been taught "that the mind is the man," but now quickly perceives "that the body is the man." (100) For "the world saw no further than the skin; men judged their fellows by their appearance." He decides that "this terrible race prejudice . . . has continued to exist because there are no great scholars, thinkers and speakers, of the negro race to challenge and overcome it." (153) He finally resolves to "go into the conflict as a negro, and win as a negro, or fail as a negro." (195) Three factors demonstrate that Negroes are capable of being civilized: "First, their desire for learning; second, their strong religious instinct; and third, their wish to be respectable and to imitate the best examples

given them by the whites." He concludes that "the negroes needed education even more than exhortation." (214) They must be taught to be patient and wise, for "the negro's remedy is not in violence." They must also learn no longer to give unanimous support to one political party, but to divide politically on grounds other than race, such as the great economic questions of the day. The great issue is whether the Negro will "join with his white brethren to rescue the land from poverty and ruin." (287-290) Undoubtedly this was an appeal to the Colored Farmers' Alliance to close ranks with the People's Party to save America from Plutocracy.

Indeed the other major theme of the novel concerns the "money power." The Colonel, on the verge of bankruptcy, possessed "none of the traits of the business man." (13) On the other hand, Lawyer Buryhill, the villain from New York, "looked at his fellow-man . . . as if his softly working mouth tasted the pleasant flavor of property." Buryhill had quietly bought up the Colonel's mortgages and outstanding tax titles, "and was steadily weaving his net around the unfortunate man." (43-44) Huguet saves the Colonel when he discovers an inheritance in Baltimore, more than enough to get out of Buryhill's clutches. (245-246) The northern capitalist is completely discredited by the Colonel's revelation of his duplicity. (251-259) This episode was, of course, an illustration of the working of the "money power" on a minor scale, at the local level.

These are the major social and economic themes which emerge from the fiction of Ignatius Donnelly. Does this analysis throw any light on either the current controversy over Populism or on Donnelly himself? In terms of the larger Populist issue, Norman Pollack is convinced that the Populists were at least socialists and implies that they may have been semi-Marxists in their social philosophy.<sup>15</sup> To Pollack, "Populism was a progressive social force," which "accepted industrial society, posed solutions not seeking to turn back the clock, and was strongly prolabor."<sup>16</sup> In order to see Donnelly in this light one must appropriate the conspiracy view of history for oneself as Pollack seems to do.<sup>17</sup> If the Plutocracy actually had hatched a conspiracy against the people, if the "money power" truly pulled the strings of government behind the scenes, then Donnelly and the Populists generally were practical progressive reformers attempting to loosen the death grip of this eastern oligarchy. To Pollack, then, Donnelly must have been the Sage of Nininger. More to the point, however, is the goal Donnelly had in mind. What practical results were to come from his proposed reforms? His fiction at least does not support the allegation that his goal was socialism, but rather that he desired a return to his idealized version of preindustrial American society. His radical means was meant to serve a conservative end. If Pollack's interpretation of Populism is to stand, Donnelly's fiction would seem to strike him from the rolls of the Populists.<sup>18</sup>

Richard Hofstadter suggested another approach to populism in his *Age of Reform*, where he outlined what he considered to be the dominant themes of Populism. Hofstadter argues that the Populists were not forward looking, but looked to the past for their utopia, to preindustrial America, drawing on the traditions of Jacksonian democracy.<sup>19</sup> It is hardly necessary to repeat the fact that Donnelly yearned for the good old days of the yeoman farmer and the free entrepreneurial worker. Furthermore, the Populists saw no fundamental conflict of interests between the farmer, the worker and the small businessman. For all practical purposes there was a social dualism: the money power and plutocrats were on one side and the people on the other. The solution for all social ills was the destruction of the Plutocracy. Since both major parties were controlled by the money power, only a third party could be effective. The struggle would be difficult, perhaps a failure, resulting in revolution and anarchy.<sup>20</sup> This point, which Hofstadter documents with *Caesar's Column*,<sup>21</sup> undoubtedly fits Donnelly. Additionally, the Populists saw all American history after the Civil War in terms of a conspiracy by the international money power, stemming from Lombard Street. The conspiracy theory was often linked with a rhetorical anti-Semitism, with the Jew as the villain in the international conspiracy.<sup>22</sup> All this is prominent in Donnelly's fiction. Finally, Hofstadter pictures the Populists as nativists, suspicious of city people, aliens and immigrants and fearful of the urban masses. The movement was also marked by Anglophobia and fear of Russia. And, even though Populists were against militarism and imperialism, they were extraordinarily nationalistic.<sup>23</sup> Most of what Hofstadter called the "nativist mind" corresponds to the analysis of Donnelly's thought.

Indeed, Donnelly appears rather neatly to document Hofstadter's interpretation. On the other hand, it is possible that Donnelly does not fit at all, for Hofstadter explained this "folklore" of the Populists by their loss of status in society. "Rank in society! That was close to the heart of the matter, for the farmer was beginning to realize acutely not merely that the best of the world's goods were to be had in the cities and that the urban middle and upper classes had much more of them than he did but also that he was losing status and respect as compared with them."<sup>24</sup> Donnelly was a lawyer, politician and author, but never a farmer.

Why, then, did he identify with the farmer? One possible explanation might be that Donnelly was an opportunist, a political demagogue, who, having alienated major party leadership in Minnesota, had to run for office outside the usual party structures. Thus he had to employ the necessary rhetoric to sway the discontented rural community. But this explanation seems inadequate. Donnelly was generally consistent in political ideology, if not in party, for thirty years.

Hicks offered what may be a more tenable explanation. He argued

that Donnelly's later hostility to the railroads was due to their treachery toward him in the 1860's.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, because of early political defeat he broke from the party organization and became independent, in the beginning because of a feeling of personal pique, because of a desire for revenge on the Republican leaders, and to get back in Congress. However, Hicks felt that prior to his political defeats "the reformer spirit within him had been deeply buried beneath the demands of party regularity."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Hicks stated: "Donnelly had a way of identifying his own political fortunes with the success or failure of reform."<sup>27</sup> In his final judgment, Hicks felt that Donnelly could best be explained on the basis that he loved a fight, particularly against odds. "He became a republican to fight slavery; . . . an antimonopolist to fight the railroads; . . . a greenbacker to fight what he called the 'money power'; . . . [and] a populist to fight the 'plutocracy'. . . . The underlying motive of his literary labor is in this same undying spirit of pugnacity."<sup>28</sup> In other words, Donnelly can be characterized as a reformer who delighted in a good battle. He "was not insincere; he was in earnest, but he lacked a 'balance wheel.'"<sup>29</sup> He was the Don Quixote of Minnesota.

Another, perhaps more fruitful, explanation of Donnelly, at which Hicks only hinted, is the line of thought that I wish to expand. This is the suggestion that the failures of Donnelly's own life triggered much of this pugnacious reformism. He was both a disappointed capitalist and a frustrated politician. The American dream had failed for him. As a land speculator he lost nearly everything. As a railroad lobbyist he was inadequately rewarded and ill-treated. In the late 1860's he was forced out of Congress by the party leaders. Furthermore he was frustrated in every bid for the United States Senate. As a result of these disappointments and frustrations, he identified himself with others who were politically and economically displaced, specifically with the farmer. Seeking office through third parties, he soon was captured by the rhetoric and became a leader in every reform cause.

Is there any evidence for such an explanation? The dates of his novels are suggestive. Just prior to the writing of *Caesar's Column* in 1889, Donnelly had suffered a crushing defeat in his bid for the Senate. In fact, he began to write the novel the day after the election. Hicks' suggestion that Donnelly identified his own political fortunes with the progress of reform is evocative here. *Caesar's Column* would seem clearly to indicate that Donnelly was somewhat pessimistic about the success of reform when he wrote it; but later, when his political fortunes again appeared to be on the rise, he incorporated the gist of the argument in the preamble of the Omaha Platform.<sup>30</sup> *Dr. Huguot*, published in 1891, was in part an appeal to bring all farmers, including the Colored Farmers Alliance, into cooperation with the People's Party. It was at precisely this time that the Alliance were discussing the issue of a third party, in Ocala (December, 1890) and in Cincinnati (May, 1891). The

Southern Alliance failed in its effort to segregate the Colored Alliance, and the Colored Alliance almost unanimously supported a third party. Moreover, in several states, Populists were courting the Negro vote during the early 1890's.<sup>31</sup> The clear message of *Dr. Huguet* was that the plight of the poor farmer was the same, black or white, and that the black farmer should break away from "party slavery." (288-289) And who would be served better than the author himself if *Dr. Huguet* should precipitate widespread black support for the People's Party? *The Golden Bottle* was written in the heat of the 1892 campaign. Although Donnelly's name had been mentioned for the presidential candidacy, he instead received the People's Party nomination for governor of Minnesota. Yet, even though Donnelly was not running for the Presidency, Ephraim Benezet was obviously his alter ego. Nominated by the People's Party, Ephraim was swept into the Presidency and, once in office, carried out the Populist reform program. He had beaten the Plutocracy even in their last efforts to keep him from taking possession of the office. Perhaps the explanation for Donnelly's engrossment with the idea of conspiracy and plutocracy can be made intelligible by the fact that he blamed his own political defeats on others.

The interpretation would also explain his animosity toward industrial society. Failing in all his entrepreneurial schemes, he had been unable to fulfill the American dream. Therefore, he attacked those who had been financially successful. He blamed the Plutocracy, which had perverted the American dream into a Darwinian struggle. They had transposed the value structure of one society into a new society—the old entrepreneurial virtues were transformed into the gospel of wealth and the cult of the self-made man. The average man could not hope for success unless the social and economic conditions of the preindustrial entrepreneurial society were restored, for the individual was no longer free: the yeoman farmer and independent entrepreneur had disappeared. Thus did Donnelly drift into the movement of agrarian protest.

Therefore, Ignatius Donnelly was neither the Don Quixote of Minnesota nor the Sage of Nininger. Rather, he was a man, frustrated both in business and in politics, who identified with others in society who had experienced similar economic and social disappointments. One way among many in which he expressed his case against this apparently hostile society was his fiction, which he also hoped would serve as a catapult to launch him at last into national political prominence.

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### footnotes

1. This biographical material has been gleaned from John D. Hicks, "The Political Career of Ignatius Donnelly," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, VIII, 1 (June, 1921), 80-132; Martin Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly: The Portrait of a Politician* (Chicago, 1962); and Frederic Cople Jaher, *Doubters and Dissenters: Cataclysmic Thought in America, 1895-1918* (New York, 1964), 96-108.

2. Ignatius Donnelly, *Atlantis: the Antediluvian World* (New York, 1882); *Ragnarok*:

*the Age of Fire and Gravel* (New York, 1883); and *The Great Cryptogram: Francis Bacon's Cipher in the So-called Shakespeare Plays* (Chicago, 1888).

3. Edmond Boisgilbert, M.D. (pseudonym), *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1890). I have used the 1960 edition, edited by Walter B. Rideout. Edmond Boisgilbert, M.D. (pseudonym), *Dr. Huguet: a Novel* (Chicago, 1891). Ignatius Donnelly, *The Golden Bottle: or the Story of Ephraim Benezet of Kansas* (New York, 1892).

4. This is in direct contrast to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), one of the most popular American novels of the nineteenth century, which described the perfect society that had evolved by the year 2000. But Donnelly was obviously influenced by *Looking Backward*, as were many other authors. Indeed the 1890's was the decade of American utopian fiction. Allyn Forbes listed forty-eight different utopian novels published in the United States from 1884 through 1900, all but nine of them during the 1890's. Allyn B. Forbes, "The Literary Quest for Utopia, 1880-1900," *Social Forces*, VI, 2 (December, 1927), 179-189; list on pp. 188-189. Robert Shurter felt that the utopian novel was the most widely read type of literature in America during the 1890's. Robert L. Shurter, "The Utopian Novel in America, 1888-1900," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, XXXIV, 2 (April, 1935), 137-144.

5. *Caesar's Column*, 15. I will not attempt to document the summary description of the plot, except for direct quotations. Further documentation for each of the novels will appear in the text. The purpose of the plot summary is to give the reader some framework for the themes which will be presented.

6. Oscar Handlin, "American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the Twentieth Century," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XL (1951), 323-344. Norman Pollack has attempted to answer Handlin's charge that American anti-Semitism originated with the Populist movement in "Handlin on Anti-Semitism: a Critique of 'American Views of the Jews,'" *The Journal of American History*, LI, 3 (December, 1964), 391-403.

7. Pollack, "Handlin on Anti-Semitism," 401-402.

8. C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," *The American Scholar*, XXIX, 1 (Winter, 1959-1960), 55-72; quotation from p. 65.

9. John Higham, "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: a Reinterpretation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIII, 4 (March, 1957), 559-578; quotation from pp. 564-565. For a similar interpretation of Donnelly's own anti-Semitism, see Jaher, *Doubters and Dissenters*, 131-134, 139.

10. Donnelly wrote in a short editorial, "No; no. We would not persecute the Jews. . . . We are fighting plutocracy not because it is Jewish or Christian, but because it is Plutocracy—destructive even of itself." *The Representative*, Sept. 12, 1894, as cited in Irwin Unger, ed., *Populism: Nostalgic or Progressive?* The Berkeley Series in American History (Chicago, 1964), 26.

11. As argued by Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Mid-western Populist Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

12. Jay Gould was a gold speculator and railroad magnate. This is an obvious reference to Judas.

13. Reference to Daniel, chapter II.

14. I will not belabor the point that Negro should be capitalized, by the use of [sic].

15. Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, 68-84.

16. *Ibid.*, 143.

17. Pollack argued that there was no irrational conspiracy view of history. As far as I can tell, he simply accepted the conspiracy as fact, depersonalizing it by making capitalistic society the culprit. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-42.

18. Elsewhere, Pollack says, "Populism . . . did not seek to restore a lost world of yeoman farmers and village artisans. The reverse was true." Norman Pollack, "Fear of Man," in Sheldon Hackney, ed., *Populism: The Critical Issues* (Boston, 1971), 99. Certainly this cannot apply to Donnelly. Irwin Unger, in reply to Pollack, emphasizes such matters as the Populist obsession with the money power, their negative response to the city, their nativism and anti-Semitism. "Critique of Norman Pollack's 'Fear of Man,'" in *Populism: The Critical Issues*, 112-119.

19. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1961), 62. He uses both Populism and Progressivism in a larger sense than just the political. Thus when he refers to Populism, he means a type of thought which can be observed in the general rural discontent following the Civil War. See pp. 4-5.

20. *Ibid.*, 64-67.

21. *Ibid.*, 67-70. I wonder how carefully Hofstadter had considered *Caesar's Column*. Among other things he says, "Far more ominous . . . than any of the vivid and hideous predictions of the book is the *sadistic and nihilistic spirit* in which it was written" (p. 70). Italics added. For an excellent critical evaluation of Hofstadter's treatment of Populism, see Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago, 1963), 16-27.

22. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 70-81.

23. *Ibid.*, 82-86.

24. *Ibid.*, 33. The debate whether Populism was progressive or reactionary, which I have chosen to document with the interpretations of Pollack and Hofstadter, is put within its proper historical perspective by C. Vann Woodward. Woodward demonstrates the initially favorable judgment of Populism by American intellectuals and historians in the 1930's and 1940's, then the disillusionment and alienation of much of the intellectual community from the Populist tradition as it seemingly became identified with McCarthyism. The new interpretation saw Populism as reactionary. C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual."

25. Hicks, "The Political Career of Ignatius Donnelly," 84.

26. *Ibid.*, 87. It must have been buried very deep.

27. *Ibid.*, 104-105.

28. *Ibid.*, 130.

29. *Ibid.*, 132.

30. "The Omaha Platform of the People's Party," in *Populism: The Critical Issues*, 2-4.

31. Jack Abramowitz, "The Negro in the Populist Movement," in *Populism: The Critical Issues*, 35-51. See also C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 235-249. For further bibliography on Populism and race relations, and for Populism in general, see the bibliographical essay in *Populism: The Critical Issues*, 158-168.