NOVEL FAITHS: NONSECULAR FICTION IN THE LATE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY U.S.

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation, "Novel Faiths: Nonsecular Fiction in the Late-Nineteenth-Century U.S.," presents a new theory of the novel genre using an archive seldom put to such ends: late-nineteenth-century America's outpouring of popular religious fiction. For many scholars, the novel form and the period after the Civil War share a defining trait: they are uniquely modern, and that modernity rests in part upon their secularity, or turn away from shared religious worldviews. I argue instead that the mid- to late-nineteenth-century U.S. novel could be, and often was, consciously oriented toward modernity *and* the nonsecular. My theory of the novel centers on the genre's formal and epistemological flexibility, its ability to represent characters' experiences of multiple possible realities, both worldly and transcendent. I contend that, for this flexibility, the novel was a key testing ground for new Protestant beliefs emerging in the late nineteenth century—beliefs that responded experimentally to social and intellectual upheavals like the rise of Darwinian evolution, the death toll of the Civil War, and the social ills of industrialization. Using the characters' patterns of belief as models, the religious novels taught their readers how to move between faith and empiricism, straddling knowledges and hybridizing worldviews that might otherwise seem at odds.

These arguments about religious fiction have two implications for literary study. First, my project underscores how white Protestant traditions have historically asserted—and still assert—exclusionary power in the U.S. public sphere. I ask literary study to confront the reasons that the Protestant center of U.S. culture and literary-religious histories has endured for so long. At the same time, I also consider nineteenth-century religions as meaningful generators of worldviews, whose political consequences and cultural resonances were far from uniform. To

this point, my project showcases how marginalized demographics, including women and racial minorities, have long used faiths to resist oppressive social structures and build communities.

In **Chapter One** I examine Protestant responses to midcentury theories of natural selection through novels published just before and after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Oliver Wendell Holmes. In these two texts, questions of theological and genetic determinism intertwine. I analyze the complex storytelling techniques that allow the texts to promote liberal Protestant over orthodox Calvinist responses. In **Chapter Two,** I focus on Spiritualism, an immensely popular movement devoted to speaking with the dead that gained new appeal after the Civil War. I read the sequels to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's Spiritualist bestseller *The Gates Ajar* (1868) alongside novels on Spiritualism by canonical realists Henry James and William Dean Howells. I argue that Phelps reworks conventional theories of literary realism to acknowledge both material and spiritual realities.

In **Chapters Three** and **Four** I shift my focus to the turn of the twentieth century. As I show in **Chapter Three**, American literary histories often present a personalized, eroticized "spirituality" as the modern alternative to organized religion. I counter this picture of religion in the U.S. by confronting, through Charles Sheldon's bestselling Social Gospel novel *In His Steps* (1896), the sociopolitical power of organized Protestantism and Protestant fiction at the turn of the century. Finally, as a counterpoint to this focus on white Protestantism's power, in **Chapter Four,** I theorize a popular African American religious movement, Ethiopianism, as it responds to questions about turn-of-the-century African Americans' fitness for future leadership. The Ethiopianist novels I analyze imagine the glorified Africa of biblical tradition being radically restored in their own day. In doing so, I argue, they present a radical alternative to visions of the U.S.'s secularization, creating a nonsecular basis for African American pride and solidarity.

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INTRODUCTION: NOVEL FAITHS

The eponymous protagonist of Augusta Jane Evans's religious novel *Beulah* (1859) is an unlucky soul. An orphan who the narrator describes as "sad," "sickly," and "decidedly ugly," Beulah endures trials that include being separated from her only sister, watching a close friend die slowly of consumption, being courted by an unwanted suitor, and, ultimately, sacrificing her financial independence to become a wife.[1] The drama of that succession of events, though, is nothing compared to Beulah's internal crises of faith. Once an avid reader of religious texts, Beulah becomes absorbed with the work of philosophers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, G.W.F. Hegel, and Thomas Carlyle. Now she senses that all systems of thought are "different, nay opposed" and that perhaps, as one of her mentors suggests, "there is no criterion of truth; all is merely subjective."[2] Beulah seems well on her way to a life as a religious skeptic.

But that's not the end of the story. In the final chapters, Beulah returns to her Protestant faith, as do several of the other doubt-ridden characters. What saves them, the narrator suggests, is witnessing Christian truths at work in Nature and other believers' lives. As one of the characters expresses it, "If I am not [an infidel] now, it is because my wife's unpretending consistent piety has taught me to revere the precepts of a revelation which I long ago rejected."[3] Beulah, for her part, realizes she has spent too much time in the "cold, misty atmosphere" of the metaphysicians, and not enough time in the soul-sustaining realms of faith, domesticity, and the natural sciences.[4] These characters' emotion-laden reflections are lessons for the novel's readers. As the narrator forewarns and the characters' experiences prove, "A spirit of skepticism . . .

[1] Augusta J. Evans Wilson, *Beulah* (London: W. Nicholson and Sons, 1859), 8.
[2] Ibid., 256, 257.
[3] Ibid., 219.
[4] Ibid., 373. Whereas philosophy had compromised her faith, Beulah believes "scientific fact" can help sustain it, pointing people like a "lamp" toward knowledge of God.

broods like a hideous nightmare over this age," and the psychological consequences are severe.[5] Religious readers, especially female ones, can mitigate their risk of falling prey to that nightmare by following the characters' paths to spiritual renewal. The plot teaches nineteenth-century Protestants to arm themselves not with doctrines, which are subject to philosophers' runarounds and believers' hypocritical neglect, but with an appreciation for the natural world and humble acts of Christian domesticity.

This project is about the longer historical pattern into which *Beulah's* lessons to readers fit—a pattern of late-nineteenth-century U.S. social, intellectual, and psychological upheavals and the theological innovations that popular religious fiction unfolded in response. I argue that the novel genre was uniquely suited to guide Protestant readers through moments of mid- to late-century theological flux. That was because its key formal features— its dealings in plots and protagonists and layering of multiple forms and focalizers— allowed it to represent individuals' experiences of multiple possible realities, both spiritual and material.[6] Using the characters' patterns of belief as models, religious novels taught readers how to move between faith and empiricism, straddling knowledges and hybridizing worldviews that might otherwise seem at odds. I contend that, for these characteristics, the religious novel had a key role in helping liberal Protestant traditions, or those that emphasized individuals' innate goodness and reason, evolve across the latter half of the nineteenth century. Liberal Protestants, including often women and racial minorities, used the novel as a testing ground for new beliefs, thus helping Protestantism keep pace with changing circumstances.

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[5] Ibid., 221.

[6] My attention to the novel's layering of perspectives or voices draws closely on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel's *polyglossia*. Bakhtin argues that the novel realizes a "multi-languaged consciousness." Although previous genres, like the epic or drama, had certainly represented interactions between multiple voices, the novel was the first to make that multiplicity its "creative center." Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and the Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975; essay first published 1914), 12.

This is not literary study's usual story about religion in the late-nineteenth-century U.S. The rise of Darwinian evolution, the death toll of the Civil War, the class conflicts brought on by industrialization—all make good premises for stories of late-century religious decline. These secularization stories, in turn, have long structured mainstream American literary histories. They are present, for example, in characterizations of the rise of literary realism as an act of supersession, a moment when supposedly early Romantic or sentimental ideals gave way to more "modern" confrontations with the material world. They also inflect the even more pervasive divide between antebellum and postbellum literature. As Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs have described, one of the reasons literary study clings so firmly to an antebellum-postbellum divide is that it lets the postbellum era be distinctly modern. The Civil War, in this story, becomes a "*necessary* tragedy"—a tragedy, yes, but also the "condition of possibility" for literary techniques like realism or epistemologies like pragmatism.[7] A widespread loss of faith is often described as part of this necessary tragedy. 600,000+ deaths in the Civil War—the equivalent of 6 million today. It's easy to imagine how devastation on that scale would shock Americans out of their previously comfortable faiths, and there are plenty of examples to support that narrative. "I feel myself like a ship without a pilot or compass," reads one woman's diary, cited in Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering*.[8] Formerly faithful, this woman simply cannot reconcile the carnage and mass destruction of the Civil War with belief in a powerful and loving God.

Yet such narratives can easily homogenize and underestimate postbellum belief, not to mention homogenize and *over*estimate antebellum belief. Some nineteenth-century Protestant

[7] Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs, "Against 1865: Reperiodizing the Nineteenth Century," *C19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists,* 1, 2 (2013), 259–284, 265.
[8] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War,* 2nd edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2009; first published 2008), 192.

believers, like the writer of the aforementioned diary, responded to the psychological demands of the Civil War and other midcentury social and intellectual changes by becoming religious skeptics or atheists (or freethinkers, liberals, humanists, agnostics, secularists, or rationalists, all designations that nineteenth-century unbelievers tried out).[9] Others left Protestantism for traditions like Mormonism or Catholicism, although these conversions happened less often than we'd think listening to Protestants' fearful stories and warnings.[10] Still others took the opposite approach, recommitting themselves to the so-called fundamentals of the Christian faith, including interpreting Scripture as the inerrant word of God and pursuing personal salvation over social change.[11] Although literary histories tend not to associate this last response, the rise of religious fundamentalism, with the late nineteenth century, it, too, was a product of this era. The brand of Protestant believers this project considers—those who recalibrated their faiths to meet post-Enlightenment demands for rational thinking or empirical knowledge— were one cluster of traditions among many. Equally importantly, they were a cluster that both preceded and outlasted the Civil War. To emphasize that continuity, my timeline begins in 1859, the year Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species,* and ends just after the turn of the twentieth century. By starting in the antebellum era, then focusing primarily on postbellum religious fiction, I show that 1865, the conventional dividing point for early versus modern or contemporary American literature, was not a watershed moment in America's religious history, separating old-fashioned

[9] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheist: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 12–13.

[10] For more on the perceived threats of mid- to late-century Mormonism—threats that were framed as at once theological, sexual, and racial—see Peter Coviello, "Plural: Mormon Polygamy and the Biopolitics of Secularism," *History of the Present,* 7, 2 (2017), 219–41. Catholicism was seen as a threat because, following waves of Irish Catholic immigration at midcentury, it was the largest single denomination in the U.S. And, unlike Mormonism, which remained generally despised or feared until the century's end, 700,000 Protestants did convert to Catholicism before the turn of the twentieth century. Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xx.

[11] According to George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925,* 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; first published 1980), these are key traits of Christian fundamentalism.

piety from modern skepticism. Rather, late-century liberal Protestants built upon established traditions of reimagining and affirming faiths through fiction. When Charles Sheldon published his religious novel *In His Steps* in 1896, it sold millions of copies before the turn of the century.[12] Making sense of those numbers requires a historical narrative that traces nineteenth-century Protestantism's persistence, its myriad shifts and schisms not its wholesale decline.

The Protestant traditions and fictions on which I focus are, with the exception of those in the final chapter, white middle-class New England Protestantisms. They belong to what Tracy Fessenden and others have called the Protestant center of American religious history and culture. These traditions stand at the center not for inevitable reasons, although the histories often read that way, but because they have worked aggressively, often violently, to assert their power over other religious traditions and establish their value as the exclusive safeguard of American democracy.[13] As Fessenden suggests, contemporary studies of American religion can counteract this historical imbalance by two approaches. The first is to attend to those faiths that white New England Protestantism has traditionally pushed to the margins, including African American, Native American, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim traditions. The second is to look directly at the Protestant center and analyze its claims to power and its internal heterodoxies and fissures. This project participates by and large in the latter approach. Following Fessenden, I describe how fiction helped nineteenth-century white New England Protestants establish their place of privilege in American culture and their status as an "unmarked category" or neutral assumption in American literary and religious histories.[14] I show that, in nineteenth-century New England fiction, this process of self-definition relied particularly upon constructing contrasts

[12] Timothy Miller, *Following in His Steps: Biography of Charles Sheldon* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 86.
[13] Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 2.
[14] Ibid.

between white Protestant and Catholic or African American characters. The novels used the exoticized religious Other to clarify the identity and appeal of the white Protestant traditions they promoted.

In analyzing how fiction helped white Protestants acquire power or privilege in the U.S., this project joins others in critiquing white Protestantism's work as ideology. But that is only part of the project's ends. I agree with Jenny Franchot, in her groundbreaking essay for the field of secular theory "Invisible Domain" (1995), that scholars of American literature are often all too quick to expose religion as ideology—far quicker than to recognize religion as also a meaningful marker of identity or category of experience.[15] The reasons for that inclination are many. The field tends to equate intellectual critique with a process of "demystification"; to model its approaches to religion after the theories of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault; to filter discussions of religion through ironically "safer" or more widely accepted studies of race, class, and gender; and to assume misguidedly that "we must agree with what we teach," as Franchot notes.[16] When literary scholars analyze religious texts without taking up questions of transcendence, immortality, or absolute meaning on the texts' own terms, however, they "colonize" others' relationships to the divine.[17] The alternative is to study "religious questions . . . *as religious questions*," allowing them to challenge the field's standard accounts of Western political culture and its usual boundaries on the real in human experience.[18]

Since the publication of Franchot's article in 1995, theorists of the secular have taken great strides to address its concerns. This project builds on that momentum by analyzing white New England Protestantism as both a seat of cultural and political power and also an array of

[15] Jenny Franchot, "Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies," *American Literature,* 67, 4 (1995), 833–842.
[16] Ibid., 840, 834, 838.
[17] Ibid., 839, 840.
[18] Ibid., 839.

deeply honored worldviews that guided people's identities, communities, knowledges, politics, psychologies, and social actions. The traditions in this project functioned as ideologies, yes. But, as Joanna Brooks articulates in a different context, that is not the only—nor the most compelling—thing we can say about them.[19] These were also ontologies and epistemologies; they were people's ways of understanding their lives as purposeful and coherent. In support of this claim, one of this project's key undertakings is to draw out the heterodoxies and movements within white middle-class New England Protestantism. Texts like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), Oliver Wendell Holmes's *Elsie Venner* (1861), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Beyond the Gates* (1883) and *The Gates Between* (1887), and Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1896) showcase and participate in debates between liberal Protestantism and Calvinism, Spiritualism, fundamentalism, and spirituality. They teach readers to adopt certain Protestant worldviews over others as a means of thinking, socializing, and even voting differently in their changing ages. To homogenize white Protestantism, then, is to miss what is interesting or significant about these texts as nineteenth-century pedagogical tools. It is also to risk implying a contrast between the privileged White Protestant and an equally homogenized Other on the margins, a binary that ironically reinscribes the logic nineteenth-century Protestants used to classify their beliefs as categorically different from anyone else's.[20] In the final chapter of this project, I counteract this homogenizing tendency from a different angle by turning from heterodoxies *within* the white Protestant center to one of many possible examples beyond it: Ethiopianism, a radical African American Christian tradition grounded in biblical prophecy. In

[19] Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.
[20] As Tomoko Masuzawa suggests in *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3, nineteenth-century white Protestants' religious hierarchies took several forms, but all boiled down to the same basic contrast between Us and Them, the West and the rest. This binary persists in many contemporary understandings of world religions.

studying the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Ethiopianist novels of Pauline Hopkins, Sutton Griggs, and John Bruce, I point to the diverse personal and political ends that religions can and do serve outside and against those of white New England Protestant traditions.

This project is also about women's contributions to American literary and religious histories. As I address in the following section, literary study has traditionally left popular religious fiction out of its scholarship and curricula, for reasons including that the markers "popular" and "religious" have challenged the field's professional identity. Because "popular," in turn, has long been code for "liked by women" in many cases, another way to frame this historical sidelining is through the texts' associations with femininity. The authors of this archive were, on the whole, the "damned mob of scribbling women" about whom Nathaniel Hawthorne notoriously complained, irritating to him precisely because their work was so remarkably successful on the era's reading markets.[21] In attending to popular religious fiction, then, I consciously participate in efforts to theorize and historicize the work of American women writers. My arguments build upon those of feminist scholars like Nina Baym, Nancy Armstrong, Cathy Davidson, and Julia Stern who have rethought both American literary history and the novel genre with gender as the key analytical category.[22] When I argue that popular religious novels were politically consequential and formally innovative, it is in dialogue with ongoing debates over the social and aesthetic value of U.S. women's fiction. I also argue, in concert with work by feminist religious historians, that the novels were theologically innovative. All three of the female authors in my project—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Pauline

[21] "Nathaniel Hawthorne to William D. Ticknor," 1855, in *Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William L. Charvat, Thomas Woodson, et al., Vol. 17 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962–1997), 305.

[22] Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–70* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Hopkins—lay out their texts' theological contributions in explicitly gendered terms. They understand themselves to be redressing doctrines that were created by and for men. For this reason, I suggest, their texts mediated changes occurring in male-dominated religious institutions less than they led or initiated these changes. The women writers mobilized the novel's formal features to chart new theological territories. And, in doing so, they sustained or strengthened American Protestantism for a new era.[23] As Gregory Jackson argues, popular religious fiction in the late nineteenth century moved and regulated U.S. Protestantism in much the same way that the sermon did in earlier, more localized settings.[24] By focusing on popular religious fiction, I draw out women writers' substantial roles in U.S. literary and religious histories alike.

As this discussion of the Protestant center and its gendered and racialized margins suggests, the pay-offs for incorporating religious fiction into American literary histories are two-fold. First, studying religious fiction attunes literary study to the ways that white Protestant religious traditions have historically asserted—and still assert— power in the U.S. public sphere. As Tracy Fessenden contends, when scholars distance themselves from texts' religious questions, whether because they assume secularity is a neutral stance or unconsciously relegate religion to the "private" realm of belief, they honor commitments that have historically given white Protestantism unchecked social and political power.[25] In that sense, to theorize religion and secularity is to notice the particularity of worldviews that, for their privilege, often pass for

[23] Ann Douglas suggested the opposite in her early study of women's religious fiction *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1977), 5. She argues that nineteenth-century women novelists and newly effeminate ministers traded a theologically rigorous Calvinism for a "sentimental peddling of Christianity for its nostalgic value." Although texts like Joanna Brooks's "From Edwards to Baldwin: Heterodoxy, Discontinuity, and New Narratives of American Religious-Literary History," *American Literary History*, 22, 2 (2010), 439–453, have put pressure on this narrative, discussions of the theological effects of popular religious fiction often still invoke narratives of decline. In Joan Hedrick's biography *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 288, for example, she suggests that, by the mid-nineteenth century, "winning souls to Christ was no longer germane; the religion of Christianity had, by 1857, been superseded by the religion of Culture."
[24] Gregory Jackson, "'What Would Jesus Do?': Practical Christianity, the Social Gospel Realism, and the Homiletic Novel," *PMLA*, 121, 3 (2006), 641–661, 642.
[25] Tracy Fessenden, "'The Secular' as Opposed to What?" *New Literary History*, 38 (2007), 631–36, 635.

universal. Second, studying religious fiction asks literary study to wrestle with religion in all its irreducible forms. As Jordan Alexander Stein and Justine Murison have shown, one of the difficulties in studying religion is that the objects and the methods of analysis are both variables in the work; we might confront religion as a social framework, a rhetorical construct, something part and parcel with ideology, or a category of experience.[26] When we allow for this kind of multiplicity in our reading practices, we expand outward from literary study's usual assumptions about the personal and political ends that religions can serve. As Molly McGarry argues, literary study often subscribes to a "politics of secularism" that deems secularity progressive and religion anachronistic or reactionary by default.[27] The alternative is to let religious worldviews have multiple consequences, both in terms of the realities to which they give rise and the social actions they inspire. To these ends, my project emphasizes how the novel genre created space for believers' equally "real" experiences of spiritual and material worlds to intersect. It also accentuates how marginalized people, including women and racial minorities, have long used faiths to resist oppressive social structures and build alternative communities. If studying religious fiction attunes us to often invisible power structures in the U.S., it equally asks us to grapple with unexpected or invisible forms of activism.

U.S. Religious Novels and Their Critics

Even as late as the first half of the nineteenth century, the idea of a "religious novel" would have been something of an oxymoron. Although long-form fiction was popular in the American colonies since their founding, "novels," designated as such, did not become popular

[26] Jordan Alexander Stein and Justine S. Murison, "Introduction: Religion and Method," *Early American Literature,* 45, 1 (2010), 1–29, 4.
[27] Molly McGarry, *The Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 5.

until after the Revolutionary War.[28] Oddly even before novels became popular, however, they were the subjects of vehement critiques from some religious authorities.[29] The Puritan church was at the forefront of these denunciations. With the help of the press, religious leaders condemned novels as trivial at best and immoral or licentious at worst. Novels' exciting tales were a dangerous distraction from the real world, a "delicious intoxication" that would make the "simple and touching narratives of the New Testament" hold no charms.[30] They were also, in some critics' accounts, a sure-fire path to sexual promiscuity. As one anonymous author warned in the editorial "Novel Reading, A Cause of Female Depravity," novels "poison" women's blood, making it "no uncommon thing" for them to lure their friends' husbands out of happy marriages for their own sexual pleasure.[31] As Cathy Davidson argues, the years after the Revolutionary War were an unstable time, and, for ministers among others, the novel was an unwelcome challenge to traditional modes of communal authority.[32]

How, then, by even the mid-nineteenth century, did fiction become a primary vehicle for conveying religious messages to Protestant audiences? Two historical changes occurred that made that reversal possible. First, as early as the 1740s in Britain and well into the nineteenth century in the U.S., many novelists responded to the censure of the genre by reassuring readers, either in their plots or prefaces, that *this* novel was moral, or educational, or truthful—essentially "all of those things the novel was presumed not to be."[33] While still denouncing novels in the abstract, therefore, they introduced the idea that novels could have varying effects on readers,

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[28] As Cathy Davidson suggests in *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 40, texts that we would now call novels circulated in the U.S. prior to the 1790s, but they usually went under different names. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), for example, was advertised as a "sentimental history."
[29] Ibid., 41.
[30] David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 116, 117.
[31] Qtd. in Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word,* 45.
[32] Ibid., 41.
[33] Davidson, *Revolution and the Word,* 40.

including potentially beneficial ones. Their arguments were a case for the possibility of didactic or moral fiction. Meanwhile, religious authorities were developing a new strategy for countering the "satanic" secular press: trying to beat them at their own game.[34] The religious publishing industry arose in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries explicitly to keep novels and other supposedly morally corruptive literature out of Americans' hands. To accomplish that goal, religious publishers knew they had to give their nonfictional theological lessons an entertaining spin. So, perhaps ironically, they turned to narrative. In the beginning, that meant publishing mostly eighteenth-century steady sellers like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Richard Baxter's *A Call to the Unconverted.*[35] But, as David Reynolds argues, the narratives that emerged from religious publishers between 1790 and 1850 moved incrementally away from the Puritan plain style, eventually reaching the kind of nonsectarian, novelistic style that made texts like Lewis Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (1880) or Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1896) national bestsellers.[36] What religious publishers established in the process was that Protestant lessons could be wrapped up or disguised in narrative form—a foundational premise for the religious novel. One key observation of this dissertation is the explicitly pedagogical goals of late-nineteenth-century religious novels. The texts position themselves as teaching readers a particular Protestant way of being in the world. Histories of early novel writing and religious publishing in the U.S. provide the backstories for these concerns. Early novelists and religious publishers countered accusations of their texts' immorality by advertising their educational value. The late-nineteenth-century religious novels I examine carry on this didactic tradition.

[34] Nord, *Faith in Reading,* 119.
[35] Ibid., 127.
[36] David Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 1981), 2–3.

By the mid-nineteenth century, then, worries about the novel's powers of corruption had largely subsided. Among public audiences, religious fiction was mainstream. In intellectual circles, however, new critiques of the religious novel began to emerge, but this time precisely on the grounds of its perceived didacticism, religious partiality, and sentimental pandering to popular tastes. If these critiques seem more akin to our own contemporary scholarly perspectives, they should: they arose in conjunction with literary study's development as an academic discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, and they have continued to shape the field's fragile relationship to religious fiction since. In other words, at the same time that my archive of popular religious fiction was emerging, literary study was establishing its professional identity by showing its critical distance from it. The reasons for that critical distancing were multifold. Religious fiction, for example, was popular, and literary critics hung their status as cultural authorities on their ability to distinguish between "good" and popular literature.[37] Religious fiction was often sentimental or melodramatic, and literary study's early criteria for assessing literature devalued appeals to emotion (and, with it, most of women's fiction). Most directly to my purposes, religious fiction was theological, and literary study, having grown directly out of the field of theology, staked a claim in secularity as a key means of differentiating itself from its parent domain.[38] When literary study emerged, as Michael Kaufmann describes, there was little to distinguish literary critics from clergy. Both were cultural authorities who

[37] In *Reading for Realism: The History of U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 11, 6, Nancy Glazener discusses how literary realists contributed to their own canonization through this method. Many now-canonical works of literary realism were written by and for intellectual elites, who then solidified the texts' high-brow status (for themselves and their literary posterity) by developing theories of fiction that tautologically identified their superior traits. Regarding literary study's tendency to preserve these earlier hierarchies, Glazener comments, "To begin . . . with a sample of canonical works and to invent literary historical categories that account best—or only—for them is to memorialize the values of canon makers, rather than to take up the challenges of valuing works and narrating their historical relations that are presented by any era's range of textual productions and constructions of literariness."

[38] Michael W. Kaufmann, "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession," *New Literary History,* 38 (2007), 607–27, 608.

analyzed texts and offered interpretations of them. To change that, literary scholars self-consciously embraced a commitment to secularity. In place of inquiries grounded in faith, literary study promoted its empirical methods, its likeness to another new category of professional field in the late nineteenth century, that of a science.[39] Judging by narratives of progress inherited from the Enlightenment, literary study was theology's more modern successor.

Literary study is still working through the aftermath of these secularist assumptions. As Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman have argued, as a twenty-first-century field, we are now mostly aware of the faultiness of master narratives, including that of secularization. Yet only as we begin to imagine our analyses under signifiers *other* than secularity do we realize "how difficult [it is] to escape the terms from which [we] have presumably been liberated," how deeply the story of secularization infuses "our very analytic tools and categories."[40] Secularity has become, as Kaufmann contends, a "transcendent" category in literary scholarship, a set of assumptions "so normative that we no longer even notice them."[41] And like other such categories—maleness, whiteness—it is precisely for that reason that it continues to exert such "strong control over our thinking."[42] The way forward then, as Coviello and Hickman have posited, is to "reimagine some of the anchoring categories of Americanist critical thought" apart from narratives of religious decline, making them "productively unfamiliar by virtue of their estrangement from secularizing premises."[43] This project participates in that reimagining. As I

[39] The term scientist was coined in England in 1833 but did not come into vogue in the U.S. until the late-nineteenth century. The predecessors to modern-day scientists were natural historians or philosophers, who made theories and categories base on observation. Randall Fuller, *The Book that Changed America: How Darwin's Theory of Evolution Ignited a Nation* (New York: Viking Press, 2017), 9.
[40] Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, "Introduction: After the Postsecular," *American Literature,* 86, 4 (2014), 645–654, 647.
[41] Kaufmann, "The Religious," 614.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Coviello and Hickman, "Introduction," 649.

analyze my archive of popular religious fiction, I make visible, too, those archives that have otherwise grounded theories of the novel and U.S. literary histories, archives that have not had explicit religious-secular labels. Two of my chapters, for example, compare bestselling religious novels with realist fiction by now canonical authors like Henry James and William Dean Howells. This is not to contrast a religious archive with a secular one. Instead I participate in efforts to destabilize those very categories. As Craig Calhoun has assessed, "secular" and "religious" have long been moving targets in Western history, whose meanings have done more to regulate inside and outside, us versus them, than to point to any fixed or stable conditions.[44] The term "nonsecular fiction" in this project's title foregrounds that binary's instability in American literary contexts. I underscore the crossover between religious fiction and what has traditionally fallen beyond that marked category. I argue that, in hybridizing spiritual and material realities and moving fluidly between empirical and faith-based epistemologies, the popular religious novels in my archive are keenly representative of nineteenth-century U.S. novels' traits.

Is the Novel Secular?

In the previous section, I explained that this project treats secularity as a particularized stance and showcases the continuities between nineteenth-century U.S. religious fiction and its implied alternative. These efforts are to counteract literary study's tendency to hinge its professional identity on narratives of the West's joint secularization and modernization. One other conversation I want to address, on a similar theme, is whether the novel is itself a "secular" genre. This idea comes from genre theory rather than American literary study. When Ian Watt

[44] Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

initiated contemporary studies of the novel as a historical genre in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), he grounded the genre's identity in its "formal realism."[45] He argued that the novel differs from other genres in that it represents individual characters' sensory experiences of the material world—what they can taste, touch, hear, smell, and see. In making this claim, Watt followed in the footsteps of earlier theorists of fiction like Henry James, who argued that the novel is, on the broadest terms, a "personal impression of life."[46] Watt also importantly tied the rise of the novel to philosophical changes brought on by the Enlightenment.[47] In the eighteenth century, he argues, individuals began determining truth or reality empirically, as opposed to accepting it on others' authority or for tradition's sake. Watt identifies that turn to empiricism as the novel's defining formal innovation.

That turn can be, and often has been, narrated as a moment of theological rupture. Before Watt, Georg Lukács had characterized the novel as the genre of a world "abandoned by God," a world in which individuals must search for meaning apart from any "extensive totality" in which they understand themselves to fit.[48] Readers of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) might recognize this account of the West's secularization. Taylor describes how, after about 1500 C.E., a series of changes occurred in the Western world that transformed religious belief from basically a given to "one human possibility among others."[49] Through what Taylor calls disenchantment, for example, people came to understand the individual human mind, never

[45] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 32. Watt, like many foundational theorists of the novel, developed his arguments using an archive of European fiction. Others since, like Nancy Armstrong and Michael Davitt Bell, have reconsidered those ideas in American contexts. Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[46] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *The Art of Fiction,* Walter Besant and Henry James (Boston: Cupples and Hurd, 1884), 60.
[47] Watt, *Rise of the Novel,* 12.
[48] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature,* in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach,* ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; first published in German 1914–1915), 203, 186.
[49] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

"impersonal forces" or "extra-human agencies," as the source of meaning in the world.[50] So, too, did they exchange their understanding of the *cosmos*, a "totality of existence" with a "humanly meaningful" sense of order, for a sense of the *universe,* a body ordered by "exceptionless natural laws."[51] Taylor's theory of secularity has come under scrutiny for staging a contrast between a fixed, naïve premodern world and a dynamic, self-aware modern one. As religious historian Jon Butler has pointed out, we need look only to the Crusades or Inquisition to see that beliefs pre-1500s weren't "axiomatic," and that the biggest threat to belief in the modern age may well be indifference, not unbelief.[52] Saba Mahmood and others have also critiqued Taylor for treating Western Christendom as if it can be cordoned off from the rest of the world, ignoring secularism's geopolitics and Christianity's colonial history.[53] Still, especially combined with these critics' nuances, Taylor's theory of changing "conditions of belief" productively recasts the sense in which we might understand the novel as a secular genre. As Taylor explains, secular does not have to mean "without religion" or "with religion relegated to the private sphere." Those definitions stand at odds with the bestselling statuses and explicit political investments of many of the novels in my archive. Nor does secular have to imply a new awareness of the partiality of one's beliefs. That story of joint secularization and modernization does not accord with Western history and makes secularization seem like a universal progress narrative, rather than a process that unfolds in multiple directions and with mixed political effects. Despite what the West likes to believe about its cultural openness, as Vincent Pecora articulates, its secularization narratives are almost always one-directional; it never pictures "going back" to a

[50] The alternative is to see "extra-human agencies" and "impersonal forces" acting upon the world and imbuing it with meaning alongside humanity. Ibid., 32.
[51] Ibid., 60.
[52] Jon Butler, "Disquieted History in *A Secular Age*," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 202, 206.
[53] Mahmood, Saba "Can Secularism be Other-wise?" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

medieval religious cosmology.[54] I recognize similar progress narratives at play in some theories of the novel. The novel's new representational strategy, its formal realism or dealings in individual sensory perceptions, registers in some accounts as a step *forward* for literary representation. It is pegged as a new *and improved* mode of confronting reality that makes previous attempts seem old-fashioned.

I agree that the rise of empiricism as a framework for measuring reality called for new modes of literary representation. That change, however, did not make the novel necessarily the genre of unbelief, skepticism, or "transcendental homelessness," as Lukács would say of the European literature he studied.[55] My theory of the novel as a secular genre turns instead on Taylor's idea of changing "conditions of belief."[56] What Taylor and others in philosophy, theology, and religious studies have suggested is that the epistemological revolution that took place during the Enlightenment caused changes *within* Western Christian belief as well as to it. It made Western Christians newly concerned with what was reasonable to believe. Theologian Thomas Long explains that shift using the rise of the theodicy question as an example. Theodicy asks: If God is loving and all-powerful, why is there evil or suffering in the world? Versions of that question have existed since Christianity's beginnings. What was new in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, Long suggests, is the sense of "putting God on trial," of trying logically to justify the ways of God to humanity.[57] As Long describes, "A fourteenth-century mind would encounter terrible suffering and say, 'This is from God. What is God *saying* to us?' A

[54] Vincent Pecora, "Secular Criticism and Secularization," in *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 29.
[55] Lukács, "Theory of the Novel," 185.
[56] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 2.
[57] Thomas Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdsman, 2011), xii. We can recognize the same impulse in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), the preamble of which ends by expressing its intent to "justify the ways of God to men."

contemporary mind encounters suffering and asks, 'How does the reality of this suffering fit into my worldview? How do the pieces of reality I think of as true fit together logically?"[58]

This theological distinction brings nuance to literary scholars' understanding of the formal realism of the novel. As Long's example clarifies, the rise of empiricism did not separate a previously homogenous religious population into a set of believers who stuck to their traditional theological ways and a new set of unbelievers who switched to a faithless, empirical worldview. Although some people did fall on these far ends of the spectrum—think fundamentalists or atheists—they only represented one fraction of the possible stances to emerge in that moment.[59] In many cases, the interplay between theological and empirical worldviews took place within individuals' own experiences. Believers learned to toggle between or integrate theological and empirical explanations for observable phenomena as a matter of course. They learned to say for example, as Long suggests, that rain is both a blessing in a drought and a predictable weather pattern caused by cooling humid air.[60] Their beliefs were thus "secularized" in the term's original sense: to make worldly.[61] The theological and empirical epistemologies complemented, intersected, and placed demands upon one another.

I'm interested in the novel's capacity to represent that epistemological interplay between the religious and the worldly. In the novels I consider, the characters' empirical and theological knowledges are both necessary, just as the spiritual and material worlds to which they point are equally "real." It is in this sense, I argue, that nineteenth-century religious novels taught Protestant readers to adapt their faiths to changing times. The novels' narrative structures and multiple focalizers allowed them to bring together theological and empirical worldviews. When I

[58] Ibid., 23.
[59] Taylor, *Secular Age,* 4.
[60] Long*, What Shall We Say?,* 12.
[61] Jose Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism,* ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56.

characterize the Protestant traditions in my project as "liberal" Protestant traditions, this hybridizing tendency is the primary trait to which I refer. I am interested in Protestantisms that straddle faith and reason. Liberal Protestantism in its contemporary U.S. sense, as the opposite of conservative Protestantism or evangelicalism, fits this criteria. As it emerged in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, its defining traits included an openness to modernization, understood to include a combination of scientific advancement and industrialization; a belief that humans must initiate the lead-up to Christ's second coming, called postmillennialism; a commitment to social action or worldly involvement; a nonliteral and historical understanding of the Bible; a tendency toward "religious cosmopolitanism," or universalizing of their beliefs; and, as an outgrowth of Transcendentalism or Unitarianism, a belief in humans' goodness and reason and God's love.[62] I am invested in this particular historical formation as it belonged or gave rise to a diffuse cluster of traditions that thought across earthly and transcendent worlds. I count the four Protestant traditions I examine— white liberal Protestantism, Spiritualism, the Social Gospel movement, and Ethiopianism—all under this broader "liberal Protestant" umbrella.

The novel to emerge from these traditions offered Protestant readers lessons in reconciling multiple knowledges and realities. They showed lived religions, or faiths in worldly contexts, a concept that would only have made sense in a post-Enlightenment moment when believers began to think that faith should align with human reason and experience, as well as the other way around. We might think, for example, of one character's conclusion in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) that God *must* take mercy on the unconverted since "any father, who should make such use of power over his children as they say the Deity does with

[62] For more on liberal Protestantism in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century U.S. (and into the twentieth century), see Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, ed., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and David A Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

regard to us, would be looked upon as a monster by our very imperfect moral sense."[63] This theological flexibility is a learned response for the characters in Stowe's historical romance. As the narrator remarks in the exposition, their community is more the type to go to bed at sundown out of a "general confidence in the wisdom of Mother Nature"— an example of reason or experience conforming to faith.[64] To reverse the direction of that relationship, adapting faith to reason, is an innovation the religious novel teaches readers to perform. If the novel is a modern and secular genre, it is to the extent that it portrays worlds and worldviews both shaping one another, whether earthly or heavenly, empirical or theological.

My chapters analyze four moments in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century U.S. when novels performed this theologically innovative work, helping liberal Protestants adapt their faiths to worldly happenings that could otherwise make belief seem untenable. In Chapter One I characterize liberal Protestants' responses to midcentury theories of evolution by analyzing a pair of novels published just before and after Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859): Harriet Beecher Stowe's historical romance *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) and Oliver Wendell Holmes's scientific romance *Elsie Venner* (1861). In these texts, concerns about individuals' genes and environments intertwine with theological debates about free will and moral responsibility. I analyze the complex focalization techniques, or storytelling strategies, that Stowe and Holmes use to promote liberal Protestant over orthodox Calvinist responses to this changing intellectual landscape. The novels teach religious readers that, in the face of unanswerable questions about who is responsible for human sin or error, it is most reasonable and psychologically sustaining to trust in God's love and mercy. To accomplish that pedagogical task, the novels situate their narrators at an ironic or a historical distance from the characters'

[63] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999; first published 1859), 206.
[64] Ibid., 11.

theological debates, inviting readers to identify with them as cool, more-knowing outsiders for whom the debates have been drained of their emotional urgency. The novels also create distance between the beliefs of the white Protestant protagonists and those of socially marginalized African American and Catholic characters. The latter's voices corroborate the protagonists' religious perspectives, but, in keeping with nineteenth-century scientific theories of racial and religious difference, only in the romanticized sense of demonstrating the views' "natural" truth. The novels thus exemplify how liberal Protestants used a combination of narrative and racial and religious exclusions to make their faith's growth at midcentury seem natural, even inevitable.

In Chapter Two I move from tests of faith surrounding Darwinism to those that accompanied the massive death toll and destruction of the Civil War. I focus on the formal and theological innovations in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Beyond the Gates* (1883) and *The Gates Between* (1887), the sequels to her bestselling religious novel *The Gates Ajar* (1868). Almost thirty years after publishing *The Gates Ajar*, Phelps recounts in her autobiography that the novel was, "so far as [she] can remember having any 'object' at all in its creation," a theological response to the emotional aftermath of the Civil War.[65] As she writes, "I wished to say something that would comfort some few of the women whose misery crowded the land. For it came to seem to me that . . . even the best and kindest forms of our prevailing beliefs had nothing to say to an afflicted woman."[66] The desire to address women's psychological needs in a moment of perceived theological crisis motivates Phelps to hybridize Protestantism with Spiritualism, an immensely popular nineteenth-century movement devoted to speaking with the dead. In Phelps's fiction, characters are comforted by a sense of closeness to their deceased loved ones and the promise of an afterlife that contains all the best sights, sounds, and social structures of white

[65] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters from a Life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1896; first published *McClure's Magazine* 1896), 98.
[66] Ibid.

middle-class Protestant New England. I compare Phelps's invention—a highly sensory or empirical Protestant faith—with the perspectives on Spiritualism in two novels by now canonical literary realists, Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886) and William Dean Howells's *The Undiscovered Country* (1880). I argue that Phelps expands upon Howell's and James' theories of literary realism by locating the real in a spiritual realm, which characters come to know by the same empirical methods that Howells and James use to distinguish between material realities and transcendent ideals or, sometimes, illusions.

My focus for Chapters Three and Four shifts to the turn of the twentieth century. In Chapter Three I consider Charles Sheldon's best-selling Social Gospel novel *In His Steps* (1896) as it responds to the social inequalities brought on by urbanization and industrialization. Often, I show, American literary histories present a personalized, eroticized "spirituality"— the kind of faith depicted in many psychological realist texts—as the modern alternative to organized religion. I counter this picture by confronting, through *In His Steps*, the sociopolitical power of organized Protestantism and Protestant fiction at the turn of the century. In texts like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), and Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), religious experiences consist in heightened emotional rushes and turn characters inward toward themselves. In Sheldon's novel, by contrast, religion is rife with political power. Readers learn from the characters' examples that "Christian America" is a large and inherently unified political entity, which they need only to mobilize to enact social change. All of my first three chapters, in showing how novels shaped and sustained white liberal Protestants' beliefs, also show how fiction helped consolidate this kind of social and political power. I study fiction from the Protestant center to acknowledge at once the personal meanings and political leverage of white U.S. Protestantisms.

In my final chapter, I theorize a popular African American religious movement—Ethiopianism—as it responds to questions about African Americans' place in a supposedly modernized and secularized twentieth century. In keeping with the defining principles of Ethiopianism, the novels I analyze, Sutton Griggs's *Unfettered* (1902) and *The Hindered Hand* (1905), John Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* (serialized 1907–09), and Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (serialized 1902–03), imagine the glorified Africa of biblical tradition being radically restored in their characters' own day. As they try to plot that vision on a secular timeline, they struggle to articulate the transition between the oppressive present and that ideal future. Still, as I argue, in narrating characters' everyday encounters with Ethiopianist thought, the texts teach readers how to use ancient biblical stories to envision alternative future social realities. Ethiopianism provides a basis for racial pride and unity, a theological grounds for building African and African American identities and communities. By recognizing the characters' radical faiths as also the wellsprings of their political consciousness, I counteract a secularist politics that automatically dissociates faith from progressive thinking. My study of Ethiopianist fiction supports literary histories in which progress is multi-directional and activism takes many forms, including in and through religion. My work on religion indeed complements other recent efforts to decenter Western assumptions in literary study, including efforts to conceptualize American literature on a transnational or global scale. As Toni Wall Jaudon has argued, secular theory has an important role to play in these transnational or global turns. If literary study disregards people's experiences of multiple possible realities, it risks ever widening its lenses while always assuming the same fixed world being inhabited.[67] This project foregrounds experiences and

[67] Toni Wall Jaudon, "Obeah's Sensations: Rethinking Religion at the Transnational Turn," *American Literature,* 84, 4 (2012), 715–741, 718–20.

stances that Western concepts of modernity and secularity have put out of focus. Its story about the novel and religion in the late-nineteenth-century U.S. creates space for multiple worlds.

CHAPTER ONE: EVOLVING FAITHS IN STOWE AND HOLMES: AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY AND THE ENDURING POWER OF PROTESTANTISM

In December 1859, prominent botanist Asa Gray became the first American reader of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species,* published in London just a few weeks earlier.[68] Although now often described as the father of evolutionary theory, Darwin was not the first to theorize species' evolution from a common source. Other natural philosophers including Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Robert Chambers, and even Darwin's own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, had proposed versions of the theory decades earlier.[69] What Darwin introduced in his work, and what underlay *On the Origin of Species*'s powerful hold on the U.S. popular imaginary, was a theory of natural selection, the idea that species change slowly over time by a natural mechanism, no providential design required.[70] The hypothesis had profound social and theological implications. *On the Origin of Species* would bring new evidence to long-standing debates over whether races had developed from one common origin or multiple ones.[71] It would corroborate findings in the nascent field of geology thus supporting new, more expansive understandings of time.[72] It would ask American Christians to reassess God's relationship to humans and creation, a task that religious historian George Marsden cites as a key catalyst in American Protestantism's split into modern-day liberal and conservative camps.[73] In short, as Randall Fuller suggests, "The book

[68] Fuller, *Book that Changed America,* 16, 13.
[69] The term "scientist" was not coined until 1833 and would not come into vogue in the U.S. until late in the nineteenth century. Darwin's grandfather expressed his theory of evolution in a (sometimes bawdy) poem, "The Temple of Nature, or The Origins of Society." Ibid., 9, 21-22.
[70] Ibid., 24.
[71] Ibid., x.
[72] Ibid., 23.
[73] George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (second edition, New York: Oxford UP, 2006; first edition 1980), 20.

would do to American intellectual life what the war did to its political, economic, and social spheres: blast it to pieces and then reconsolidate it in new ways."[74]

Physician, writer, and public intellectual Oliver Wendell Holmes came to this changing intellectual scene early. Holmes belonged to the same elite Bostonian circle, the Saturday Club, as Asa Gray, and members discussed *On the Origin of Species* within two weeks of Gray receiving a copy.[75] We might predict that Holmes, a physician, would be moved to write about Darwin's theories. We might not predict that his response would take the form of a serialized romance— "The Professor's Story" (1859), later published as a book entitled *Elsie Venner* (1861). *Elsie Venner* was, as the subtitle read, a "romance of destiny," set in small-town nineteenth-century New England. The story follows Bernard Langdon, a medical student on leave as a schoolteacher, as he investigates the serpentine qualities of one of his students, the eponymous Elsie Venner. Bernard is fascinated by Elsie's calculating eyes, snake-charming powers, and apparent inability to feel love or moral obligations. With the help of a local physician, a medical school professor, and Elsie's long-time nurse Sophy, Bernard traces Elsie's mysterious nature to a prenatal condition: her mother was bitten by a rattlesnake while she was in the womb, so now she suffers from an "innate organic tendenc[y]" that runs askew to the "parallels of Nature."[76] Meanwhile, the town's two rival Protestant ministers, one a strict Calvinist and the other a young liberal, recalibrate their faiths to account for Elsie's case. Confronting the fact that Elsie inherited her condition, the Calvinist must conclude that there are

[74] Fuller, *Book that Changed America*, ix.
[75] As Fuller documents, Gray loaned his copy of *On the Origin of Species* to Charles Loring Brace, a social reformer and abolitionist, on December 26, 1859. Brace discussed it with Franklin Sanborn (a supporter of John Brown), Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau on January 1, 1860. It did not take long for interest in it to spread, both through their circle and other outlets. As Fuller relates, "*On the Origin of Species* swept through Boston like a choice bit of gossip. The book was discussed at dinner parties, debated in drawing rooms, argued about in salons and clubs and societies." Fuller, *The Book that Changed America*, 4, 33, 39.
[76] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* (London, UK: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1861), 72. Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically within the text.

some crimes that are not sins and for which God cannot judge. The purportedly more liberal minister does not agree. Unable to fathom why God would biologically predispose some people to sin, he joins the Catholic Church, where he believes, in keeping with conventional anti-Catholic views of the time, that "traditional forms and ceremonies" will replace "the necessity for private judgment" (224).

At the heart of Holmes's novel, then, is a somewhat unusual question: If God is all loving and all powerful, why would he give some people genes or environments that make them prone to sin or error? The inquiry puts a scientific spin on a much older theological quandary, the *theodicy* problem, or why God would allow bad things to happen to good people.[77] It revisits orthodox Calvinist doctrines on free will and determinism and accounts for new biological and social scientific complications. *Elsie Venner* accordingly demonstrates the adaptability of nineteenth-century liberal Protestants and their fiction. Confronted with new scientific theories about all that is "congenital and hereditary" in human behavior, Holmes's characters question their previous beliefs and rework them to account for the new information (14). They choose to be flexible on the finer points of their Calvinist theologies in order to preserve the general gist of their religious worldviews. I argue that, in representing these adaptations, *Elsie Venner* reworks and extends a thriving tradition of early- to mid-nineteenth-century religious fiction. It shows, moreover, the kind of crafty thinking that made religious fiction popular and theologically avant-garde across the century. Darwinian evolution may have presented a new challenge to Protestant

[77] The theodicy problem, that is, trying to reconcile belief in a loving and powerful God with the presence of worldly evil and suffering, only arose in its modern form during the Enlightenment. As theologian Thomas Long describes, prior to that, Christians still asked theological questions about the presence of evil in the world, but from the perspective of believers trying to understand God's work rather than skeptics "putting God on trial." Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), xii.

faiths, but the process of using fiction to contemplate and revise beliefs was, by the midcentury, familiar.

To highlight that continuity, this chapter examines *Elsie Venner*'s deterministic theories alongside those that organize Harriet Beecher Stowe's historical romance *The Minister's Wooing* (1859). Set in eighteenth-century Puritan New England, *The Minister's Wooing* stages a contrast between a theologically brilliant but otherwise abstracted minister, Samuel Hopkins, and the more emotionally attuned, materially minded women in his community, particularly Kate Scudder and her daughter Mary. When the women receive word that James, an unconverted member of the community and Mary's secret love interest, has died, their grief compels them to reject their previous faiths in the Calvinist doctrines of election and predestination. As James's mother reasons in distress, "Think of all God's power and knowledge used on the lost to make them suffer! . . . It is not right! No possible amount of good to ever so many can make it right to deprave ever so few."[78] Rather than reject the Christian faith entirely, however, the grieving women turn, much like the main characters in *Elsie Venner,* to a more forgiving version of it. Guided by Candace, an African American servant to James's family, they reason that, if God loved humans enough to sacrifice his son's life for them, certainly he would not damn the majority of them to an eternal death (202).

Both *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner,* then, show Protestant characters adapting their faiths to keep up with changes in their intellectual cultures and psychological states. These thematic parallels were, in part, by Holmes's design. By 1859, Stowe and Holmes were close professional acquaintances, regular letter correspondents, and mutual admirers of one another's

[78] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999; first published 1859), 213, 214. Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically within the text.

work—the early stages of a lifelong friendship.[79] In a letter exchange with Stowe in 1860, Holmes directly solicits her advice on *Elsie Venner,* describing the romance as a "perilous experiment" that takes up "that mighty question of automatic agency in its relation to self-determination."[80] Holmes warns Stowe that the text's style may not always "please [her] tastes" or "exactly meet [her] judgment."[81] Still, he believes their final goals as writers are the same: he, too, desires to "leave the world a little more human than if I had not lived."[82] Although this correspondence was private, Stowe's and Holmes's earliest readers may well have detected the texts' intersections on their own. *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner* were published in *The Atlantic Monthly,* a Boston-based periodical that Stowe and Holmes had helped establish and to which they regularly contributed.[83] Not only that, but the novels were published in consecutive issues: *Elsie Venner* started up the very month that installments of *The Minister's Wooing* stopped, implying, for readers, a continuity across the novels.[84] Regular subscribers and loyal readers of the journal would therefore have had good reason to approach Holmes's romance with Stowe's questions of theological determinism in mind.

This print history notwithstanding, Stowe's and Holmes's texts have rarely appeared together in contemporary analyses, and for telling reasons. *Elsie Venner* tends to attract scholarly attention today for its scientific interests. It is classified as a scientific romance, a medical novel, or a proto-naturalist text, all literary traditions typically coded masculine and secular and

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[79] John Morse's 1896 collection of Holmes's letters to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes: In Two Volumes* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1896), testifies to the authors' regular, amiable correspondence. Joan D. Hedrick's biography of Stowe, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 394, 397, conveys the longevity of that relationship. For example, Holmes wrote and recited a poem in her honor at her seventy-first birthday party in 1882, and, three years before Stowe's death in 1896, she refers to Holmes as a "brilliant mind" and writes him a letter praising his talent.
[80] Qtd. in Morse, *Life and Letters,* 265.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Hedricks, *Harriet Beecher Stowe,* 289.
[84] *The Minister's Wooing* ran in *The Atlantic Monthly* from December 1858 to December 1859 and *Elsie Venner* ran from January 1860 to April 1861.

associated with the later nineteenth century.[85] When scholars have occasionally examined the novel's religious interests, as Gregory Jackson and Zachary McLeod Hutchins have done, they have then deemed *Elsie Venner* a religious allegory, with Elsie's snake-like traits representing the nature of evil or original sin.[86] *The Minister's Wooing,* in contrast, has overwhelmingly registered as a historical romance and, for its religious interests, a paradigmatic example of early- to mid-nineteenth-century domestic, sentimental, or "women's" fiction. Stowe's and Holmes's novels are separated, in short, by genre, gender, and period all at once —this despite the fact that they were published literally back-to-back in the same periodical. With the notable exception of Jenny Franchot's work on Holmes's *Elsie Venner* and Stowe's *Agnes of Sorrento,* pairing the two authors has just not made sense in typical literary-historical frameworks.[87]

The result is that American literary study has struggled to acknowledge religious fiction's cultural work beyond the early nineteenth century. To be sure, the events that prompt characters' theological innovations in Stowe's and Holmes's novels differ. Stowe's characters confront the death of an unconverted loved one, while Holmes's come to terms with individuals' powerlessness before their genes. Yet the new theological conclusions the characters reach and the formal techniques the novels use to promote them are strikingly similar. Stowe's and

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[85] Eric Carl Link's study of *Elsie Venner* in *The Vast and Terrible Drama: American Literary Naturalism in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 10, is a notable exception. He acknowledges the "blend of science and theology" in *Elsie Venner* and uses it to argue for a new definition of American literary naturalism, one that recognizes the movement's roots in romanticism as much or more than realism. Jennifer Fleissner analyzes why literary naturalism has usually been understood as a masculine movement and how the idea of compulsion or "stuckness" might help us conceive of it otherwise in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For recent examples of *Elsie Venner* being analyzed as medical fiction, see Jane F. Thrailkill, "Killing Them Softly: Childbed Fever and the Novel," *American Literature,* 71, 4 (1999), 679–707, and Stephanie Browner, "'Profound Science' and 'Elegant Literature': Doctors in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Periodical Fiction," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 42, 4 (2000), 363–83.

[86] Gregory S. Jackson, "A Game Theory of Evangelical Fiction," *Critical Inquiry,* 39, 3 (2013), 451–85; Zachary McLeod Hutchins, "Rattlesnakes in the Garden: The Fascinating Serpents of the Early, Edenic Republic," *Early American Studies,* 9, 3 (2011), 677–715.

[87] Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Holmes's characters both respond to tests of their Calvinist faiths by endorsing a key tenet of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism: that God is loving and forgiving, so he would not condemn people for wrongdoings beyond their control. Moreover, Stowe and Holmes consciously use the narrative structure and formal traits of the romance to coach readers through this flexible response. I consider two strategies in particular by which the texts try to shape readers' faiths. First, they have first-person narrators— uninvolved in the stories but very involved in the storytelling—who temper or mediate the readers' relationships to the characters. Readers are invited to respond coolly, knowingly, even light-heartedly, to events that, for the characters, provoke a crisis of faith. Second, the novels layer the perspectives of multiple characters, including marginalized Catholics and African Americans, to characterize liberal Protestantism as an authoritative truth that crosses, even as it paradoxically helps maintain, racial and religious boundaries. Through these strategies, *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner* teach their majority white New England readership how they can rework their faiths in times of doubt. The novels are targeted lessons in preserving Protestantism's power, in the dual sense of its personal significance for believers and its place of social privilege.

From a literary-historical perspective, such lessons matter because they offer correctives to narratives of nineteenth-century America's secularization. As I consider in this chapter's conclusion, Darwinism was not the first—nor certainly the last—intellectual, social, psychological, or political "rupture" that nineteenth-century American Protestants had to navigate to preserve their faiths. Nor was the characters' empirically-guided theological reorientation the only possible Protestant response: confronting new scientific developments, some believers saw little need for their previous faiths and became skeptics, or saw little need for

the new scientific findings, and became fundamentalists.[88] What we see in *Elsie Venner* and *The Minister's Wooing,* however, is a compromise, a Protestantism that absorbs and expands around uncertainties created by empirical evidence. Reading the two novels together underscores how New England liberal Protestants adapted their beliefs— gradually, continually, and often with the help of the novel— across the nineteenth century. Recognizing their evolving practices at midcentury sets the stage for American literary histories in which Protestant faith and fiction is an enduring pattern.

Romantic Life and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism

U.S. Calvinism had liberal rivals since its beginnings. We might think, for example, of Arminianism, a sect (or "heresy," as Calvinists would have it) that revised Calvinist doctrines on predestination, election, and total depravity to allow humans just a bit of freedom in controlling their fates. The specific alternatives to orthodox Calvinism now known as liberal Protestantism, though, began to take shape the U.S. in the early nineteenth century, a product of Romantic reworkings of Enlightenment values.[89] Frustrated with never knowing the state of their souls, Calvinist believers began seeking answers in nature and in their individual religious feelings, a theological application of empirical methods.[90] By midcentury, these methods solidified and expanded to include practices like reading the Bible nonliterally and treating Jesus as a historical

[88] For more on the history of fundamentalism, including the major voices and parties involved, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.
[89] Following Leigh Eric Schmidt in *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 20, I understand liberal Protestantism to have arisen alongside and in conjunction with other liberal religious traditions including Transcendentalists, Reform Jews, Spiritualists, and, later in the century, Theosophists. Together these traditions form the historical category now known as religious liberalism.
[90] Christopher White, *Unsettled Minds: Psychology and the American Search for Spiritual Assurance, 1830-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 1.

figure.[91] The events inspiring these changes—abolitionists' desire to denounce slavery on biblical grounds, for example, or Darwinism's challenge to biblical creation stories—did not prompt the same responses in all believers.[92] Some nineteenth-century faiths dissolved into apathy, were overtaken by skepticism, or found new anchoring principles in fundamentalism, a movement that arose by the end of the century. Liberal Protestantism was another possible response, an attempt to reconcile worldviews that initially seemed incompatible.

Fictional texts like *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner* at once documented and propelled these midcentury developments within American Protestantism, as historians like Cathy Gunther Brown and David Reynolds have shown.[93] They did so through narrative. Unlike sermons or essays, the novels could introduce unorthodox beliefs as characters' seemingly intuitive responses to new lived experiences. When James is thought dead in *The Minister's Wooing*, for example, the women in his community exchange an intellectually rigorous, psychologically demanding Calvinism for an intuitive sense of God's love and goodness (16, 168). Similarly when *Elsie Venner*'s Reverend Honeywood contemplates Elsie's genetically determined depravity alongside his niece's seemingly innate goodness, he cannot help but exchange his orthodox creed for something less "severe," less "hard-headed," less guided by abstract theories in old books (221, 211, 204, 62, 285). In depicting the faiths to which

[91] These practices have their roots in the German tradition known as biblical criticism or higher criticism. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 20.

[92] In *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 20–26, George Marsden points to three movements whose simultaneous rises influenced the appeal of liberal Protestantism at midcentury: Darwinian evolution, German higher criticism, and the blending of theology with Idealism, as opposed to the common sense philosophy that had dominated American thought previously. Idealists believed in a strong dualism between the material and spiritual realms, one known empirically and the other intuitively, as opposed to affirming that facts, including facts of Scripture, could be apprehended clearly with the senses. Molly Oshatz offers what I take as a complementary lineage in *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Literal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). She argues that liberal Protestantism coalesced during the antebellum era as a response to Christian debates over slavery. Anti-slavery moderates could not argue that the Bible condemns slavery on literal grounds, so they began reading the Bible nonliterally or distinguishing between the spirit and the letter of the law.

[93] Cathy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 1981).

characters' worldly experiences drive them, Stowe's and Holmes's texts model why fiction is an effective catalyst of new religious ideas or movements. They deal in lived religions, how faiths are adapted and expressed in secular contexts.

It is not unusual or surprising, then, that Stowe and Holmes took up theological questions in narrative form. They were playing to one of fiction's most basic pedagogical strengths, its ability to represent doubts and debates as individual experiences. What perhaps is more surprising is that they elected the romance as their genre-of-choice for the task. In the mid-nineteenth century, the distinction between romances and novels was a significant one. Romances were understood to deal in the realm of the extraordinary, supernatural, mysterious, or exotic. Novels, in contrast, were representations of everyday reality. Today, we might recognize *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner* as examples of what Eric Carl Link calls the "modern" romance, a transgeneric category originating in the late eighteenth century that hybridizes the fantastic elements of the medieval romance with a novelistic concern for realistic everyday detail.[94] Stowe and Holmes, however, do not claim that blended status for their texts. Rather, they draw explicit attention to the dramatic, romantic, and extraordinary elements of their plots—lost lovers, attempted murders, dark strangers, and charmed snakes, for example— and, at the same time, uphold the texts' abilities to represent and speak to everyday realities. They theorize that it is indeed *because of,* not despite, the texts' dramatic or extraordinary-seeming elements that they are relevant to readers as instructive models.

In Stowe's formulation, that pedagogical value lies specifically in the romance's nearness to the joys and tragedies of everyday life. In the book's interlude chapter, "Which Treats of Romance," the narrator argues that romances may seem out of touch with reality, a familiar critique, but only if we equate "reality" with the "dead" "daily grind" of life—which she does

[94] Link, *Vast and Terrible Drama,* 35.

not (70). Her counterproposal emphasizes life's constant, dramatic ebbs and flows: "The dullest street of the most prosaic town has matter in it for more smiles, more tears, more intense excitement, than ever were written in story or sung in poem; the reality is there, of which the romancer is the second-hand recorder" (73). In a twist on traditional theories of realism, but in keeping with other Romanticists of the time, Stowe posits here that reality *is* romantic, and it accordingly demands romantic modes of representation. She even goes so far as to say that these romantic moments in everyday life are tastes of a higher, spiritual reality that humans cannot normally access. "Bitter, disenchanted people talk as if poets and novelists *made* romance," the narrator explains (72). But, in her reassessment, that is so far from the truth that it is almost blasphemous: "GOD is the great maker of romance. . . . Every impulse of beauty, of heroism, and every craving for purer love, fairer perfection, nobler type and style of being . . . is God's breath, God's impulse, God's reminder to the soul that there is something higher, sweeter, purer, yet to be attained" (72). The argument invokes a long philosophical tradition, taken up by Christians, of differentiating the current material world from an ideal or spiritual one. In the narrator's account, romances do religious work, giving readers glimpses of spiritual realities that they may otherwise struggle to believe in.

They also prepare readers for the realistic depths of everyday tragedies and temptations. In the plot, when the French Catholic character Virginie de Frontenac is wooed by the shallow womanizer Aaron Burr, the narrator suggests that her naïveté results from her education in a convent, where, "incredible as it may seem," she "never read a romance or a work of fiction" that could prepare her to confront the "excitement" of the world (177). One way *The Minister's Wooing* positions itself, then, is as a provider of the kind of worldly instruction that Virginie never received. It teaches readers how they can respond to temptations and, even more centrally,

to devastating losses in their own lives. One of the text's recurring motifs is the difference between abstract theological doctrines and lived faiths. Readers hear again and again that the religious truths Samuel Hopkins professes from his pulpit are different than the beliefs that the women in his community reach experientially. This is, for Stowe, a definitively gendered distinction. As the narrator reflects in her introduction to Mary's character, "Where theorists and philosophers tread with sublime assurance, woman often follows with bleeding footsteps;—women are always turning from the abstract to the individual, and feeling where the philosopher only thinks" (17). Insofar as romances deal in lived realities, then, they align with the women characters in discerning a path to lived religions. Stowe's theory of the romance establishes a framework for readers to receive the theological lesson she conveys.

Holmes shares with Stowe a confidence in romances' real-life applications. *Elsie Venner,* too, attests to the romance of everyday life. But whereas Stowe understands life's romantic realities to consist in emotionally-charged events, Holmes locates them in occurrences that challenge scientific thinking. According to *Elsie Venner,* the purpose of reading romances is to help people grapple with improbable or extraordinary happenings. Bernard introduces this line of reasoning into the text when, in a letter to his medical professor (the narrator) about Elsie's apparent snake-charming abilities, he asks, "Have you read, critically, Coleridge's poem of *Christabel,* and Keats's *Lamia*? If so, can you understand them, or find any physiological foundation for the story of either?" (197). Bernard suggests that the romantic poetry may hold a key to Elsie's case that the Professor's medical books can assist in explaining but not supply on their own. The Professor's response attributes a similar value to romances. While he believes those particular poems' interests are entirely "mythological, and not in any sense physiological," he senses that Bernard's broader questions belong to "that middle region between science and

poetry which sensible men, as they are called, are very shy of meddling with" (202, 198). By allowing for a realm beyond the usual purview of science or "sensible men," a phrase Stowe also employs, the narrator builds an argument for Bernard's investigations, which rely upon romances, not empiricism, for their initiating hypotheses.

The fluidity between literary and scientific evidence within the text in turn suggests a scientific function that the text itself might fulfill. Just as Keats's or Coleridge's poems help Bernard process the unusual facts or the "romance" of Elsie's case, Holmes's story offers to help scientifically-minded readers, like his colleagues in the medical field, grapple with phenomena that they are usually "shy of meddling with" (198). Holmes admits, in a letter to a fellow physician, "I do not know that such a pre-natal poisoning might not affect the disposition, etc., but I do not assert it."[95] The wording of his statement, a response to the interlocutor's curiosity about whether Elsie's case is "real," places more emphasis on medicine's unknowns and possibilities than its currently verified theories. To similar ends, we might note that Holmes responded with interest when readers of *Elsie Venner* wrote him letters describing cases of prenatal poisoning in their families.[96] He also conducted scientific research on the subject while writing Elsie's story: Holmes corresponded with S. Weir Mitchell, an expert on rattlesnakes, to ask questions pertinent to the plot and kept a rattlesnake at Harvard Medical School so he could observe its behavior.[97] All of this is to suggest that, rather than a journey into the realm of pure speculation, *Elsie Venner* was, for Holmes, an exploration into the margins of scientific reality, the "middle region" where science and poetry meet. This was an endeavor, moreover, that would likely have resonated with his educated New England readership. As Laura Otis describes, the nineteenth century was a moment when scientific and literary texts were both accessible to

[95] Qtd. in Morse, *Life and Letters,* 262.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., 258–59.

public audiences, students often split their time between the two fields, and scientists regularly quoted poets in their publications and vice versa.[98] Holmes contributes to this exchange by using the romance to test ideas that have at least the potential of being scientifically accurate or "real," but that empiricism cannot quite figure out.

Holmes's theory of fiction might explain why, in a prefatory note to the novel that appears in *The Atlantic Monthly* but not in the earliest book editions, the Professor makes a point of claiming that the text is based on true events. He tells readers, via a supposed letter to the editor, "I really wouldn't undertake to tell an 'imaginary' story, or to write a romance, or anything of the kind. [But] I might be willing to relate some curious matters that have come to my knowledge, arranging them in a collective form, so that they would probably pass with most readers for fictitious."[99] That emphatic claim to nonfiction status is maintained neither in the body of the text, which alludes to its own "romantic" devices, nor in the preface to the first bound edition. (Here Holmes readily asserts the text's status as a romance for the "common privilege of poetic license" that it grants him [v].) Yet, even in this later instance, Holmes blurs the lines between romance and reality, clarifying in the preface that "through all the disguise of fiction a grave scientific doctrine may be detected" in Elsie's story (v). The ongoing play with the boundaries between fact and fiction reinforces the theory of the romance that Bernard and his professor develop in their correspondences. The text attunes readers to the realistic lessons or ideas that, as a romance, it contains.

In this sense, *Elsie Venner* joins *The Minister's Wooing* in making an explicit case for the real-life value of the romance. Readers can expect to *learn* from the texts, romances though they

[98] Laura Otis, ed., *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), xvii.
[99] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Professor's Story: The Preliminary Correspondence," *The Atlantic Monthly,* 5, 27, (Jan. 1860), 88–91, 88.

are, because Stowe and Holmes construct a theoretical framework in which that relationship to romantic fiction makes sense. The texts' explicit attention to genre, then, is the foundation upon which their moral of the story, their case for being doctrinally flexible to make faiths livable, is built. In the next two sections, I consider two strategies that *Elsie Venner* and *The Minister's Wooing* use to instruct readers in these lessons in theological flexibility. Within the narratives that Stowe and Holmes construct, the main characters' turn to liberal Protestantism comes to seem less like a decision to be made and more like the *only* sensible response to psychological and intellectual turmoil. The novels' formal and rhetorical features help guide readers into new theological territory.

Knowing Narrators, Resilient Readers

The texts' first strategy for helping readers adapt their faiths is to provide a first-person omniscient narrator who frames and explains the plot events for readers. In both cases, the narrators emphasize that they are telling their stories with some level of personal remove from the events being narrated. In Stowe's case, this a historical remove: the nineteenth-century narrator recounts events from the late-eighteenth century that she has learned by perusing "old smoky yellow letters" and conducting other "antiquarian researches" "years after all the parties concerned were gone on the eternal journey beyond earth" (112, 43). In *Elsie Venner*, the distance between the narrator and the characters rests upon his professional authority and the dry tone in which he makes his comments: he is a medical professor in Boston who encounters Elsie's story because Bernard, one of his students, contacts him with questions and information about it. (Holmes suggests in an introductory note to the serialized text that this narrator is not just any professor but *the* Professor, a prominent male figure in Holmes's popular essay series,

"The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table," published in *The Atlantic Monthly* from 1857–58.) The narrators' insistence that they are telling their stories secondhand does not make sense given the actual stories. The extensive knowledge to which they are privy could only be that of an omniscient narrator. But the narrators invite readers to take that incongruity as a Romantic liberty. As Holmes's narrator comments with a wink at the novel's conclusion, he learned the story he just shared from Bernard's firsthand reports and "all those other extraordinary methods of obtaining information well known to writers of narrative" (423). The narrators discuss their admittedly "extraordinary" methods of gathering information to underscore their distance from the events that transpire in the plots, their stances as outside observers.

Having once established this outsider perspective, the narrators can draw readers into alignment with it. The narrators suggest to readers that they, too, belong outside of the story looking in—a privileged vantage point that depends upon their presumed access to special knowledge. In *The Minister's Wooing*, the narrator establishes this hierarchical distance by regularly reminding readers that their religious-historical moment is *different* than the characters'— on multiple fronts. "In those days," she begins numerous sentences, before going on to describe eighteenth-century New England's more sensible sleeping habits, or different tea times, or more practical household skills (11). These initial points of contrast lead to more significant distinctions that she then makes between the eras' theologies. In those days, the narrator suggests, "thought and discussion on the most insoluble of mysteries" was "a foundation on which actual life was based with intensest earnestness" (194). Whereas nineteenth-century believers get caught up trying to reconcile God's omnipotence with the "inflexibility of the laws of Nature," the Calvinists in Stowe's depiction, the Edwardian descendants of the earliest American Puritans, believe in God's power to determine all aspects of human life and death,

including their eternal fates (312). For that reason, as Stowe describes, Calvinism or Edwardian Puritanism is a far graver and more psychologically demanding practice than the Protestantism to which readers are accustomed. This claim reaches its fullest illustration in Mrs. Marvyn, the mother of James, who has long suffered for thinking on the dark implications of Hopkins's theology, taken to its logical ends. When James supposedly dies, Mrs. Marvyn fears so greatly for his soul that she is driven to the brink of insanity (192). She cannot but see herself as "a child of wrath, an enemy to God" (63).

Mrs. Marvyn's faith is turned around when the family servant Candace comes to "talk gospel to her" (201). Candace's faith in God's love and forgiveness provides a clear point of contrast to Mrs. Marvyn's strict Calvinism. Within the narrator's carefully constructed historical framework, however, readers' faiths, too, serve that comparative function. Her repeated explanations of what religion was like "in those days" imply a readership with no direct experience of the demanding Calvinist doctrines that Mrs. Marvyn's internalizes. The narrator's imagined readers are instead the beneficiaries of the theological transition that Mrs. Marvyn undergoes: they are presumed to be already safely on the liberal side of the liberal-Calvinist divide that the novel constructs. Considering that liberal Protestantism actually arose in the nineteenth century, not the eighteenth, and that the novel was actively participating in the process, this account of readers' experiences could only be a prescriptive one. Readers may very well *not* have embraced the novel's liberal Protestant lesson, whether because they were still invested in orthodox Calvinist traditions or because their suspicions of doctrines of predestination led them to doubt and skepticism. The novel's "then and now" structure, however, works to minimize these alternatives, putting serious theological debates or trials in readers'

pasts. Readers are invited to see themselves as already inhabiting the goal toward which the characters are heading: a secure faith in God's love.

One particular way that the narrator guides readers into identifying with this stable religious-historical moment is through humor. The subject matters at hand—Calvinist doctrines of predestination and election and their psychological consequences—are weighty, and the narrator is quick to remind readers of that. As she articulates in the lead up to the story's climax, "We have said before, what we now repeat, that it is impossible to write a story of New England life and manners for superficial thought or shallow feeling" (193). Yet, throughout most of the text, the narrator's tone belies the severity of the characters' psychological circumstances. Rather than positioning readers to feel the characters' distress, she invites them to smile knowingly at the orthodox Calvinists' rigid doctrines and austere lifestyles, a rhetorical strategy that only makes sense if she presumes those doctrines and lifestyles are of the past and far from their own. As the narrator introduces Mary Scudder and her mother, for example, she compares Mary's beauty to that of the Virgin Mary in old paintings. But then she clarifies: "But Mrs. Scudder was thinking of no such Popish matter, I can assure you, –not she! . . . She had never seen a painting in her life, and therefore was not to be reminded of them" (14). The contrast the narrator paints between her own and Mrs. Scudder's voices or viewpoints—one, worldly and open to ideas, the other, just a bit too quick to insist upon its religious uprightness—becomes a shared joke for the narrator and readers to enjoy. Moreover, in invoking Catholic imagery on "our" shared nineteenth-century side, the narrator positions readers as sympathizers to an ecumenically-minded Protestantism, an assumption that was far from safe in the 1850s, a historical moment experiencing a resurgence of vehement anti-Catholicism.[100] By introducing the more liberal

[100] As Jenny Franchot describes (and as I will examine more in the next section of this chapter), American Protestants had been anti-Catholic, often vehemently, since their beginnings. In the 1830s and '40s, their prejudices

stance in a moment of jest, however, it becomes the seemingly obvious alternative to the comical rigidity of Mrs. Scudder's perspective. The narrator serves similar ends by similar means when she describes how a spring breeze comes through Samuel Hopkins's window "fluttering papers on moral ability, agitating treaties on the great end of creation, mixing up subtile [*sic*] distinctions between amiable instincts and true holiness, and generally conducting themselves like very unappreciative and unphilosophical little breezes" (167). Here again, the narrator's turn from Calvinist doctrine is all the more final for being so subtle and light-hearted. The humor depends upon readers siding with the "unphilosophical little breezes"; they must agree that the Reverend's "subtle distinctions" and "agitating treatises" are too subtle and agitating to merit much concern. In inviting readers to be amused at nature's disregard for Hopkins's work, the narrator teaches readers to move away from the characters' uncompromising Calvinist doctrines without giving it too much thought.

If the narrator in *The Minister's Wooing* occasionally uses humor to make liberal Protestantism seem natural or obvious to readers, the Professor in *Elsie Venner* employs it as his primary tactic. Stowe's narrator establishes herself as a knowing outside observer by emphasizing her historical remove from the characters, allowing her to foresee the direction their theology is heading. The Professor's ethos depends on his dry, ironic commentary on the characters and their actions. For instance, as he introduces himself and his role in Bernard's assignment to an all-girls boarding school, he pokes fun at Bernard's youthful distractibility: "Any one who looked at this young man could not fail to see that he was capable of fascinating and being fascinated. . . . [T]o send such a young fellow as that out a girl's-nesting! To give this

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took a new shape as influxes of Irish-Catholic immigrants required them to assimilate actual Catholics into the national culture at the same time that they dealt with trends toward apathy and sectarianism in their own traditions. Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xix.

falcon free pass into all the dove-cotes! I was a fool,– that's all" (25). The jesting self-deprecation serves to establish the narrator as a quick-witted commentator on the affairs about to pass, a position that he owns with self-awareness throughout the story. Whereas Bernard is "fascinating" and "fascinated," the narrator does not get swept up in his story's lure. He demonstrates that cool separation foremost in his willingness to draw attention to his narrative's construction. As he remarks in one climactic moment, "And who is [Elsie], and what?—by what demon is she haunted, by what taint is she blighted, by what curse is she followed, by what destiny is she marked? . . . Some of these questions are ours. Some were [her teacher's] Helen Darley's. Some of them mingled with the dreams of Bernard Langdon" (159–60). By breaking down the narration into its component parts, the Professor interrupts the momentum of the scene, highlighting his role as the mediator of the story. Rather than letting the story's events carry readers along, the Professor invites them to notice and enjoy the conventions upon which the plot relies. The humorous commentary keeps them from being caught up, from being "fascinated," with the characters.

Holmes's narrator uses the same narrative techniques to guide religious readers' responses to new theories of genetic determinism. In evaluating Elsie's case, the characters confront the potentially seismic theological implications of evolutionary science. The narrator, though, has no such experience. He references the new ideas so casually, so humorously, that the characters' more serious theological discussions of them come to seem behind the times—almost as if the characters have been slow to figure out a trick that the narrator has already mastered. Much like in *The Minister's Wooing*, then, readers are made to feel as if they, too, are past the characters' doubts and debates. Regardless of their previous familiarity with Darwinism, they can be "in the know" just by identifying with the narrator. Perhaps the best example of this

persuasive effect of the narrator's commentary occurs when the characters gather for a party, and the narrator invokes Darwinian theories to satirize the high-pressure nature of the event for young women making their social debut:

> No mercy for you, my love! Justice, strict justice, you shall certainly have, –neither more nor less. For, look you, there are dozens, scores, hundreds, with whom you must be weighed in the balance; and you have got to learn that the "struggle for life" Mr. Charles Darwin talks about reaches to vertebrates clad in crinoline, as well as to mollusks in shells, or articulates in jointed scales, or anything that fights for breathing-room and food and love in any coat or fur or feather! (90)

At the time Holmes published this passage, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had been on American soil for only approximately three months.[101] Asa Gray had published the first U.S. review of it two months earlier in the *American Journal of Science,* and he would not publish his more widely read series of review articles in *The Atlantic Monthly* for another three to six months.[102] Rather than a controversy or an intellectual curveball, though, here natural selection appears as a metaphor that serves creatively to critique a familiar social mechanism. Like the narrator in *The Minister's Wooing,* the Professor guides readers through change— in this case, the rise of Darwinian evolution—by modeling an easy, playful response to it.

The final question we might ask, then, is whether this nonthreatening introduction to a Darwin-friendly worldview is also an introduction to religious skepticism. The narrator's humorous commentary may well seem to help readers phase out their faiths as they phase in new

[101] This passage appeared in the April 1860 installment of "The Professor's Story."
[102] Asa Gray wrote his review for the *American Journal of Science* in February 1860. He then wrote another series of review articles for *The Atlantic Monthly* that appeared in the July, August, and October editions of 1860. He published that text in full in 1861 under the title "Natural Selection Not Inconsistent with Natural Theology; A Free Examination of Darwin's Treatise on the Origin of Species and of Its American Reviewers." For more on Asa Gray's involvement in *On the Origin of Species*'s reception in the U.S., see Fuller, *The Book that Changed America*.

evolutionary theories. In the previous passage, for example, the narrator's remark about the "struggle for life" being a just, rather than a merciful, arbitrator is a play on the long-standing Christian debate over God's relative investments in punishing sinners (justice) or forgiving them (mercy). In the Professor's formulation, natural selection replaces God as the deterministic mechanism at work in the world, bringing "justice" to the extent that it is random or without design. This may seem like a joke at religion's expense, an irreverent argument for a materialist world devoid of any deity. In the context of the remainder of the novel, though, this passage seems more like an *inside* joke: the narrator is inviting readers to share a knowing laugh at certain aspects of Protestantism, which would go over their heads if they weren't themselves familiar with or invested in a general Protestant worldview. We can see the same Protestant humor at play when the narrator observes, once again at the town's party, that the local deacon's views toward drinking are compatible with "the first miracle and Paul's advice to Timothy" (107).[103] Or, again, when he suggests that, by making ice-cream in the summer, the party's hosts are "revolting against the Higher Powers" (107, 105). Some critics, including Stowe in a different context, have interpreted such jokes as critiques of organized religion. Stowe writes in a letter in the late 1860s that she hesitates to place her most recent novel in *The Atlantic Monthly* because the kind of "casual, humorous send-ups of orthodox religion" that appear in works like Holmes's are an offense to her religious readers. As she reflects, despite personally praising his quick wit elsewhere, "Dr. Holmes has stung & irritated them by his sharp scathing irony and keen ridicule—& after all, they are *not* ridiculous."[104]

[103] According to the Book of John in the Christian Gospels, Jesus's first miracle is to turn water into wine at a wedding party. By "Paul's advice to Timothy," the narrator refers to 1 Timothy 5:23: "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake."
[104] "HBS to James Fields, n.d. [1868?]" Qtd. in Hedricks, *Harriet Beecher Stowe,* 334.

Based on plot patterns and the remainder of the Professor's commentary, I contend instead that his "casual, humorous send-ups of orthodox religion" are efforts to steer readers from orthodoxy to a more liberal Protestant perspective—the same move that Stowe makes in *The Minister's Wooing.* As in Stowe's case, Holmes's narrator invites religious readers to approach their doctrines a little more flexibly, to compromise on their "subtle distinctions" and "agitating treatises" in favor of religions that can withstand the "romance" of everyday life (Stowe 167). The narrator's commentary accordingly primes readers for the theological innovations that characters like Reverend Honeywood model, innovations that put pressure on certain traditional doctrines but stay always safely within a Protestant worldview. We need only consider *Elsie Venner*'s blatant anti-Catholic rhetoric, a dimension of the text I'll consider in the next section, to see how Holmes, too, guides readers from one Protestantism to another but never beyond it. Rather than discounting Protestantism, I argue, the Professor's humorous commentary helps a liberal strand of it to blend seamlessly into secular culture, turning it into an "unmarked category," as Tracy Fessenden might argue.[105] In both Stowe's and Holmes's novels, the narrators coach readers into identifying—naturally, comfortably, as if intuitively— with the liberal Protestant worldview toward which the characters are likewise moving.

Popish Heathens: Sustaining the Protestant Center

The second way that *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner* make liberal Protestantism appealing is by constructing racial and religious hierarchies in which liberal Protestant characters hold places of honor. Both texts include minor African American and Catholic characters whose

[105] By calling Protestantism an "unmarked category" in American culture, Tracy Fessenden means that, through writing and force, certain strands of Protestantism established themselves as part and parcel with America's supposedly secular values as a civil democracy. Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6.

marginalized perspectives offset and elucidate aspects of the white Protestants' worldviews. In the case of their African American characters, both feature the same two nineteenth-century "types." Each text has a lively, loving family servant, Candace in *The Minister's Wooing* and Sophy in *Elsie Venner*, and a relentlessly devoted male hand, Digo and Abel, respectively. The Catholic characters are equally typical for the nineteenth century but differ across the two romances. *The Minister's Wooing* features the young Frenchwoman Virginie de Frontignac; her husband, a colonel whom she does not love; and an elderly French tutor. *Elsie Venner*'s Catholic characters include the priest of the largest congregation in town; Elsie's menacing half-Spanish cousin; and, by the end of the romance, Reverend Fairweather, a new convert to the Catholic Church. Stowe and Holmes spin these character types in opposite directions, as the remainder of this section shows. Yet their characterizations are both equally rooted in nineteenth-century scientific theories of racial and religious types, a testament to the multiple ends that such theories could serve. Moreover, within each text, the Catholic and African American characters end up being remarkably similar. They are— almost interchangeably—the embodied, emotional, exotic Other to white New England Protestantism. For the purpose of convincing white New England Protestant readers to adapt their faiths to changing circumstances, then, the marginalized characters end up serving the same function: to reinforce white liberal Protestantism's rationality, cohesiveness, and social power.

As American historians like Tracy Fessenden, Jenny Franchot, and Eric Lott have shown, many white Protestants in the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. saw blackness and Catholicism as complementary threats.[106] Today, as Fessenden has assessed, race is often treated as "the *only*

[106] Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome*; Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption;* Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

meaningful category" for thinking about difference in American cultural history.[107] Prior to the nineteenth century, though, Catholicism, even more than blackness, was most likely to be identified as the antithesis to white New England Protestant identity. When an African American man in 1741 was accused of leading a plot to burn down New York City and murder its white inhabitants, for example, Philadelphia newspapers denounced him not in racial terms but as a "Romish priest."[108] By the mid-nineteenth century, those dynamics were shifting. As Fessenden shows, when Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the early 1850s, "race and not religion was on its way to becoming the primary language through which white Protestants in the United States struggled to articulate a cohesive identity."[109] That transition, though, was gradual, and far from unidirectional. In the 1830s to 1850s— the same time that slavery was drawing debates about racial difference to the forefront of American minds and politics—the U.S. experienced an abrupt surge in anti-Catholic sentiments, a response to historical events including the English Catholic Emancipation bill of 1829, the Mexican-American War of 1846, the prevalence of both class- and religion-based urban labor riots, and, above all, the massive influx of Irish Catholic immigrants following the Irish potato famine of 1845.[110] By 1860, Catholicism had approximately 3.1 million adherents in the U.S., the largest of any single religious body.[111] The numbers had many white Protestant Americans on high alert, even as slavery increasingly made race a primary marker of cultural difference. In the early 1850s, the fast-growing political parties in the North were the anti-Catholic Know-Nothings first and the anti-slavery Republicans second, an indicator of white Protestants' layered concerns about racial and religious others.[112]

[107] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 112.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid., 9.
[110] Franchot, *Roads to Rome,* xviii.
[111] Ibid., xx.
[112] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 127.

Yet mid-nineteenth-century white Protestants did more than just string together a collection of racial and religious concerns. In many cases, and often guided by popular fiction, they conflated them. They treated Catholicism and blackness as homologous traits, virtually interchangeable in their roles as counterpoints to white New England Protestantism. Holmes's and Stowe's romances participate in this conflation and, as such, offer grounds for studying its internal logic. The traits that Stowe attributes to Catholics and African Americans are intended to support a sympathetic view of them. Like most of Stowe's fiction, *The Minister's Wooing* is, in addition to a theological exposition, an argument against slavery. The text refutes claims that slavery can ever be Christian on the grounds that it violates African Americans' rightful freedom as created human beings.[113] Stowe also counters prevalent anti-Catholic messages of her day, including those of her own father, Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher.[114] Yet, while Stowe depicts African Americans' and Catholics' shared traits as *redeeming* traits, the characteristics she assigns to them—emotionality, sensuality, naïveté—are the same ones that signal their *inferiority* in other texts, including *Elsie Venner.* The movability of the key terms at stake suggests that, in both cases, Catholicism and blackness signify something missing: these categories are *not* white liberal Protestantism. They function to set liberal Protestantism apart as the dominant worldview, capable of bringing fulfillment.

In Stowe's case, the Catholic and African American characters offer a joint corrective to the white Puritans' "rigid theological discipline" (16). Mary and her Puritan community's thoughts are "intensely grappled around things sublime and eternal," and, as such, their lives are

[113] As Candace reasons, because she is human, not "a critter," then, according to the "Declaration ob [*sic*] Independence and Bill o' Rights," she is "as free as anybody," and slavery, however supposedly benevolent, is a sin (104).
[114] See, for example, Beecher's "A Plea for the West" (1835), which, in short, called for New England Protestants to come out West before Catholic immigrants overtook it and compromised its American liberties and virtues. Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati, OH: Truman and Smith, 1835).

"habitually earnest and solemn" (193, 75). In contrast, the Catholic Virginie and African American Candace are worldly, unencumbered, and emotional. When the narrator introduces Candace, she describes her as exemplifying the "abundant outwardness and demonstrativeness" of the African "nature" (66). No one corrects Candace's "irreverent" forms of self-expression, the narrator reflects, because "there was a sort of savage freedom about her which they excused in right of her having been born and bred a heathen" (71). Candace's non-white and non-Protestant identity are inseparable in this characterization. She is twice removed from the social norms of the New England community she inhabits. Similarly, when readers meet the Catholic Virginie, the narrator emphasizes her freedom from Puritan mores in explicitly racialized terms. According to the narrator, Virginie's dress resembles that of a "superb Oriental sultana," and Mary "wonders" at her "as the Anglo-Saxon constitution, with its strong, firm intensity, its singleness of nature, wonders at the mobile, many-sided existence of warmer races" (174, 267). The language draws parallels between Candace and Virginie, even as it distances them both from Mary. At the same time, the identities of all three women are conflated with the "natures" of the races or religions to which they belong. Whereas Mary represents the "snow-banks of Puritan preciseness," Virginie and Candace exemplify Catholics' and Africans' "tropical" constitutions (73, 66, 174). Whereas Mary's Puritan tastes are simple or even ascetic, the Catholic and African American characters are attuned to fine arts and romance. Finally, whereas the text presents Mary and Puritans generally as prone to overthinking, the Catholic and African American figures are freely guided by their emotions or intuitions. Instead of triangulating the characters' differences, *The Minister's Wooing* constructs a binary, with white Protestantism on one side and Catholicism and blackness on the other.

As to why the white Protestant characters have a certain nature and the Catholic and African American characters have another, the romance attributes these differences to the characters' originary climates. These climates are presented as having formed the characters personally and having given rise to their racial or religious "types" more generally. To that end, when the narrator introduces Mary, she suggests:

> Had she been born in Italy, under the dissolving influences of that sunny dreamy clime, beneath the shadows of cathedrals, she might, like fair St. Catherine of Siena, have seen beatific visions in the sunset skies . . . ; but, unfolding in the clear, keen, cold New England clime, and nurtured in its abstract and positive theologies, her religious faculties took other forms. (15)

While the narrator never mentions Catholicism by name, the references to Italy, cathedrals, and St. Catherine all suggest that the contrast at hand is between a disciplined, intellectualized Protestantism and a carefree, emotional Catholicism. Had Mary been raised in Italy, the narrator implies, she would have made for a blissful Catholic. In that scenario, Mary's changed nature would result, in part, from being "nurtured" differently. The narrator conveys that Mary's Calvinist upbringing—just like Virginie's education in a convent—has crucially shaped her nature. But Stowe also suggests that *physical* climates give rise to religious types: New England's "keen cold" cultivates Puritans' "snowbanks of cold…preciseness" and Italy's "sunny dreamy clime" gives rise to Roman Catholics' "warm nature" (15, 73, 15, 174). The same is true in the novel for racial types. Candace, "born and bred" in the heat of Africa, is among the "tropical specimen of humanity," whose "warmth of nature" stands in marked contrast to the "repressed and quiet habits of New England" (66–67). In making these claims for the formative power of originary climates, *The Minister's Wooing* should strike contemporary readers as

thoroughly essentialist. In the nineteenth century, though, Stowe's brand of racism would have sounded a progressive note in major scientific debates over the origins of races. Supporters of *polygenesis*, including most famously natural historian Louis Agassiz, argued that races were distinct species, which God created separately and unequally at the beginning of creation.[115] Stowe supported the opposing theory, *monogenesis*. Whether because they really believed all races belong to the same human species or just thought polygenesis conflicted with Biblical accounts of creation, monogenesists attributed the apparent differences between modern-day races to environmental factors. They proposed that, over time, races had been pulled in different directions by their geographical and cultural climates.[116] *The Minister's Wooing* extends that focus on climates to explain differences between Catholics and Protestants, too. In Stowe's characterization, Catholics and African Americans are homologous types because they emerged from similarly "sunny" or Romantic climates (15). The "poetic soul" of the white New England Protestant, in contrast, has been "restrict[ed]" by the "keen New England air" (16).

Yet the attraction, Stowe's romance suggests, is ultimately a false, even a dangerous one. Indeed, in Stowe's depiction—as in the broader nineteenth-century discourses that she helped to build, as Fessenden points out—Catholics and African Americans are alluring and threatening for the same reason: their "physical excess."[117] They are *too* emotional, to the point of being unthinking or irrational; *too* bodily, to the point of being sexually licentious; and *too* romantic, to the point of being naïve and childish. In the case of Candace, characters compliment her "great deal of shrewdness" but also depict her as so stubborn in her "individual point of view" that she is unable to understand received theological doctrines (68, 82). They characterize her manner as

[115] Fuller, *Book that Changed America,* 85.
[116] German physician and naturalist Johan Friedrich Blumenbach devised this theory of racial difference in the late eighteenth century. Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview,* 2nd edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999; first published 1993), 163.
[117] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 114.

warm, hearty, and cheerful but to the point of seeming animalistic, as when the narrator relates that she "shook in great billows, and showed her white teeth in the *abandon* of her laugh" (83). Similarly with Virginie, the narrator's acknowledgements of her beauty, warmth, and emotional "glow," although many, are still outnumbered by comments on her childish ignorance (174). "At eighteen," the narrator appraises, "she was more thoroughly a child than most American girls at thirteen" (177). At every step, then, the traits that make the Catholic and African American characters attractive also make them shallower than the rest of the community; they cannot share with the white Protestant characters in the "very depths" of human experience (193). For that reason, the lesson of *The Minister's Wooing* regarding racial and religious types is that Catholics' and African Americans' emotional, bodily ways of being must be "indulged in order eventually to be renounced or reformed," as Fessenden articulates it in a different context.[118] Catholicism and blackness are not correctives to white Protestantism but rather temptations that white Protestants have to learn to resist.

What do we make, then, of Candace's and Virginie's purportedly "natural" affinity for the liberal Protestant worldview that the romance promotes? It seems these characters share in the liberal awakening that the white Protestant protagonists experience. Yet, in the romance's logic, the Catholic, African American, and white Protestant characters can never actually "share" that worldview, a notion that would imply they all have equal claims to it. The plot instead suggests that, while the Catholic and African American characters may technically hold the "right" beliefs, it is only the white Protestant women characters who can fully realize them. That is because the latter believe the right things for the right *reasons*. They balance the Catholics' and African Americans' warmth, artistry, and feeling with careful thinking and somber self-reflection. Candace's and Virginie's approximations of these viewpoints are still presented as

[118] Ibid., 131.

valuable to the narrative and its lessons. Indeed, to the extent that Stowe depicts liberal Protestantism as *more* appealing for having Catholics' and African Americans' endorsement, she challenges widely held racist and anti-Catholic assumptions of her day. Yet the value of their voices never exceeds that of a corroborating force, a stamp of approval from a "type" that supposedly works by natural instinct. Readers are invited to like and appreciate Candace and Virginie for that reason. But it would never make sense, in the book's logic, for readers to identify with them, or adopt them as theological role models. Instead *The Minister's Wooing* teaches readers that these characters' viewpoints are only appealing when they are *contained.* White liberal Protestantism, in contrast, is appealing in the text as the containing framework. It is presented as the "guarantor" of social freedoms and religious pluralism, the (ironic) "safeguard of liberty" for all people, as literary-religious historian Elizabeth Fenton expresses in a different context.[119] The plurality of voices in Stowe's romance is a narrative technique that encourages readers to see liberal Protestantism as the best of all possible worldviews. If orthodox Calvinism is too cold and Catholicism and blackness are too warm, the narrative frames white liberal Protestantism as being just right.

The Minister's Wooing is a textbook example of romantic racialism and, to coin a neologism, romantic *Catholicizing*. Stowe tries to create sympathy for racial and religious Others by projecting onto them all the traits that white Protestants are thought to lack, thereby unwittingly reinforcing binaries that underwrite their marginalization.[120] Before we criticize Stowe's romance for being hypocritical or reactionary, however, in the vein of Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* or Lauren Berlant's "Poor Eliza," we should pause to

[119] Elizabeth Fenton, *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5, 7.
[120] For more on romantic racialism in Stowe's fiction, see Curtis Evans, "Chapter One: The Meaning of Slave Religion," *The Burden of Black Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

consider its romantic images as they rewrote and resisted dominant nineteenth-century discourses on blackness and Catholicism.[121] Holmes's *Elsie Venner* offers this point of comparison. This romance, too, uses the perspectives of Catholic and African American characters to build up a flattering framework for white liberal Protestantism. But the tactic is very different. In Stowe's case, the Catholic and African American characters profess the liberal Protestant beliefs that the book promotes, and it is supposedly to their and the worldview's credit. In *Elsie Venner*, in contrast, the Catholic and African American characters espouse the "wrong" beliefs. Their faiths provide a backdrop against which liberal Protestantism's merits shine even more brightly. In a moment of intellectual upheaval, Holmes's romance conveys the flexible turn to liberal Protestantism as a means for white Protestant readers to maintain not only their faiths but also their social power.

If the rise of Darwinian evolution provides the occasion for Holmes's theological deliberations, it also provides the language for his theories of racial and religious difference. Whereas Stowe attributes perceived disparities in racial and religious types to differences in people's geographic and cultural climates— a common early-nineteenth-century response to debates over racial origins—Holmes draws upon new ideas in evolutionary science to describe the differences between his white Protestant and Catholic or African American characters in temporal terms. Some "types," in his characterization, are simply less evolved than others, atavistic holdovers in the modern world. This was not the only way that Darwin's theories were being interpreted at the time. As Randall Fuller shows, many New Englanders, including in Holmes's immediate circle, invoked Darwinian evolution on the side of abolitionism, arguing that it proved, as monogenesists had long claimed, that all races had a common source and, thus,

[121] Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1977). Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature,* 70, 3 (1998), 635–68.

a common humanity.[122] But the racist and anti-Catholic alternatives were also circulating widely.[123] Focusing less on shared origins and more on apparent modern-day differences, some people argued that African Americans and Catholics were living remnants of white Protestants' primal past.

The imagery surrounding the African American and Catholic characters in *Elsie Venner* exemplifies this discriminatory reasoning. In the narrator's descriptions, to be nonwhite or non-Protestant is to be, much like Elsie, less than human. Whereas Elsie's serpentine ways are portrayed as a tragedy, a *divergence* from nature, however, the Catholic and African American characters appear animalistic as a matter of course. Thus the local Catholics can be seen on Sunday mornings "swarming into the pews like bees," with the church walls enveloping them like a "great ark" (223, 224). In their obedience to Church authorities, they are like "unthinking cattle content to be driven home by the cow-boy" (227). In turn, Elsie's African American nurse Sophy possesses "quick, animal-looking eyes," a feature she is said to have inherited from her ancestors who belonged to cannibalistic society and who thus had the "keen senses belonging to all creatures who are hunted as game" (138). While this trait may seem to make Sophy particularly fit for survival, in the narrator's characterization, the opposite is true. Instead she and the other African American and Catholic characters seem explicitly destined to die out—as Sophy indeed does in a tragic, yet preventable accident at the romance's close. After comparing Sophy to a "trilobite," an often- fossilized prehistoric ocean dweller similar to a small crab, the Professor writes, "It was impossible not to see in this old creature a hint of the gradations by

[122] Darwin himself, although from an anti-slavery family, left the racial implications of his theory to be inferred. Fuller, *Book that Changed America*, x, 104.
[123] Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America*, 238. Based on Tracy Fessenden's and Jenny Franchot's arguments about the conflation of racist and anti-Catholic sentiments at midcentury, I am extending Smedley's observations about nineteenth-century scientific racism after the rise of Darwinian evolution to posit the presence of a scientific anti-Catholicism as well.

which life climbs up through the lower natures to the highest human development" (213). In the narrator's depiction, Sophy is not only like an animal but a maladapted one at that. She is stuck at a not-quite-fully-developed stage in evolutionary history, a lag that, according to the principles of natural selection, fates her to go the way of the trilobite.

When the narrator introduces Abel, a slave to the local doctor, the language is similarly centered on images of "lower natures" that are, or soon will be, extinct. Nowadays, the narrator reports, "good specimen[s]" of "native-born New England serving [men]" tend proudly to reject the role of servant, a trend that has caused their numbers to decline (125). Taking that observation to the next level, the narrator then jests, "Paleontologists will by-and-by be examining the floors of our kitchens for tracks of the extinct native species of serving man" (125). While the language of extinction here turns upon the serving men's pride, the connection to the African American servant Abel and the word "race" in the next line remind readers of who, racially speaking, tends to fulfill those servant roles: "The female of the same race is [also] fast dying out; indeed, the time is not far distant when all the varieties of young *woman* will have vanished from New England, as the dodo has perished from Mauritius. The young *lady* is all that we shall have left" (125–26). In suggesting the disappearance of a particular class of people, the serving man or woman, the narrator also implies the disappearance of the *race* of people who tend to perform those roles. Nineteenth-century serving men and women are not expected to evolve into gentlemen and ladies but rather, like the dodo, to "vanish," leaving their fitter counterparts behind. The same language of unfitness, pre-modernity, and seemingly inevitable decline surrounds Catholicism in Holmes's depiction. The narrator suggests, for example, that a "new convert from the reformed to the ancient faith" is destined always to be "weak"; he "will never stand on his legs" in the faith, a metaphor that likens the convert to a child but also to

animals that have not achieved one of humans' key evolutionary adaptations (368). That evolutionary metaphor reaches its fullest extension when Reverend Fairweather is considering joining the Catholic Church and has a dream in which a cathedral transforms into "the wreck of some mighty antediluvian vertebrate; its flying-buttresses arched round like ribs, its piers shaped themselves into limbs, and the sound of the organ-blast changed into the wind whiting through its thousand-jointed skeleton" (361). The Church, in this dream sequence, takes the form of a prehistoric fossil. By characterizing it as such, as Jenny Franchot analyzes, Holmes relegates Catholicism to "the newly emergent inhumanity of geologic time"— never to participate in "history's progressive dynamic."[124] Catholicism and blackness are alike, then, in being narrated in the perpetual past tense. The Catholic and the African American characters survive in the immediate present but have no claims on the future.

It is against this backdrop of stagnancy or even regression that Holmes then depicts white liberal Protestantism, rational, change-oriented, and forward-thinking. This alternative appears in the text's logic, to borrow Darwinian terms, as the most "fit" worldview: it adapts pragmatically to challenges or intellectual upheavals in the environment. Of course, its appeal depends upon counting some racial and religious Others beyond the purview of its theological leniency. The "blameless" Elsie but not the "cowardly" convert Reverend Fairweather must have her misgivings overlooked—this despite that, in an unsettling extension of the romance's theory of genetic determinism, the physician in the town suggests some races have a "congenital defect" that keeps them from "choosing Christianity and civilization," and "everybody knows that Catholicism or Protestantism is a good deal a matter of race" (220, 226, 281). The inconsistency exposes the limits to white liberal Protestantism's ideals. For the new liberal theology to maintain its claims to universality—its visions of God granting mercy to all his children—those

[124] Franchot, *Roads to Rome,* 243.

beyond the scope of white Protestantism must be excused as congenitally defective and seen as predestined, according to the logic of natural selection, gradually to disappear. Rather than antithetical to the narrator's depictions of liberal Protestantism as a smooth, easy transition from orthodox Calvinism, this exclusionary claim to the future is part and parcel with it. The romance sells white Protestant readers on the new perspective by aligning that perspective with a position of seemingly natural or inevitable progress and social power.

Conclusion: Historicizing Protestantism's Enduring Power

American literary histories need to reckon with the liberal Protestant arguments in *Elsie Venner* and *The Minister's Wooing* for two reasons. First, studying their narrative strategies gives insights into how white Protestants established their enduring place of privilege in U.S. culture and history. As Tracy Fessenden argues, early U.S. Protestants used a combination of physical violence and the written word to establish their particularized values as America's supposedly secular values as a civil democracy.[125] U.S. religious histories have long had a Protestant center, in other words, because early white Protestants wrote and fought their way into that privileged position. *Elsie Venner* and *The Minister's Wooing* show that claim to power in action. Judging solely by the romances, it seems white Protestants are exceptionally good at adapting their faiths to changing circumstances. That exceptionalism, however, is their own construction, for nineteenth-century Catholic and African American religious traditions, among others, were doing similar things. To examine how Stowe's and Holmes's romances establish liberal Protestantism's ascendancy, then, is to account for the power dynamics at work among American religions. Fiction was a pedagogical tool that white liberal Protestants wielded skillfully to their own gain. That is not to say these faiths served only oppressive political ends.

[125] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 6.

White liberal Protestant fiction often participated in progressive reform movements, as we see with Stowe's major contributions to anti-slavery efforts. But, even then, white Protestants were exercising a nonreciprocal power over religious and racial Others. Fiction like *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner* helped white liberal Protestants establish themselves as gatekeepers of U.S. social and political participation.

The second reason for studying Stowe's and Holmes's romances has to do less with acknowledging Protestantism's uneven cultural power than acknowledging its ongoing historical presence. *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner* depict characters trying to reconcile their faiths with new experiences of grief and scientific understandings. In literary histories, these kinds of experiences are often cited as prime reasons for America's religious decline. We might think, for example, of how frequently the rise of Darwinian evolution and the death toll of the Civil War serve as key rupture points in American literary-religious histories. Stowe's and Holmes's romances challenge these secularization stories by showing characters muddling through doubt to arrive at new and, at least in the texts' visions, improved Protestant faiths. For contemporary literary scholars, the texts are thus reminders of the diverse responses available to people in the throes of intellectual or psychological crises. When taking into account texts like *The Minister's Wooing* and *Elsie Venner,* it becomes harder to assume that changes in Protestant faiths and fictions at midcentury were necessarily ones of loss—or that these changes stood somehow apart from the faiths' gradual evolution across the remainder of the century. The examples of theological resilience in Stowe's and Holmes's fiction create a sightline to later-century religious developments, both within white New England Protestantism and among the racial and religious demographics that it tends to push to the margins.

CHAPTER TWO: EMPIRICAL FAITHS, MATERIAL SPIRITS: THE LITERARY REALISM OF ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS

Judging from contemporary scholarship, we might be excused for concluding that prolific late-nineteenth-century writer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps built two distinct literary careers. First, there is Elizabeth Stuart Phelps the author of the bestselling Spiritualist novel *The Gates Ajar* (1868), who also wrote two popular sequels to it, *Beyond the Gates* (1883) and *The Gates Between* (1887), and a variety of shorter religious fiction. In these accounts, what is most notable about Phelps's work is, first, her innovative theology, her deftness at hybridizing a liberal Protestant faith with a Spiritualist belief in the accessibility of the hereafter; and, second, that hybridized theology's extraordinary appeal among postbellum audiences. Phelps understood her religious fiction to address a nation of mourners, especially women, who were trying to pick up the pieces of their lives after the devastation of the Civil War.[126] If *The Gates Ajar*'s sales are any indication, her methods worked: the text sold 81,000 copies in the U.S. before the turn of the twentieth century.[127] Literary historians like John Kucich suggest the novel was among the first mass media phenomena in the U.S., so widely read and enjoyed that it spawned a second market of *Gates Ajar* merchandise, including buttons, cigar cases, sheet music, medicines, and funeral flower arrangements.[128] While the other two texts in the *Gates* trilogy did not reach quite the same level of popularity, they, too, were widely read and acclaimed. Feminist scholars have

[126] As Phelps writes in *Chapters from a Life*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1896; first published *McClure's Magazine* 1896), 98, "Creed and commentaries and sermons were made by men. What tenderest of men knows how to comfort his daughter when her heart is broken? What can the doctrines do for [those] desolated by death?"
[127] Carol Farley Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 30.
[128] John J. Kucich, *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth University Press, 2004), 72.

studied all three novels for their interventions in the social, psychological, and religious life of the late-nineteenth-century U.S.[129]

Outside of circles that are consciously invested in women's or religious fiction, however, a different picture of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps emerges. This is Elizabeth Stuart Phelps the literary realist, author of texts like *The Silent Partner* (1871) and *Doctor Zay* (1882) that document nineteenth-century women's roles in the textile industry and medical professional, respectively. In these portrayals, Phelps is a secular feminist, involved in projects like the essay collection *Sex and Education* (1874) that defends women's rights to equal schooling. [130] She is also a respected colleague of realists like Henry James and William Dean Howells. In 1908, for example, Howells invited Phelps to contribute a chapter to a collaborative novel that he was sponsoring—and agreed to pay her more than any other author in the collection, including Henry James.[131] For scholars of the realist Phelps, that kind of acclaim rewarded her turn from writing religious fiction to recording the dynamics of her age. She became a better writer, in other words, the further she moved away from writing about religion. Biographers like Carol Kessler do not hesitate to call *The Silent Partner*, *Doctor Zay*, *Avis*, and *A Singular Life* her "best" work.[132]

These realist-religious hierarchies have become so naturalized in contemporary literary study, both within studies of Phelps and beyond them, that Phelps's own categorizations of her

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[129] For recent examples, see Lisa Long, "Chapter Two: Dead Bodies: Mourning Fiction and the Corporeity of Heaven," in *Rehabilitating Bodies: Health, History, and the American Civil War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 58–82; Shirley Samuels, "Mourning and Substitution in *The Gates Ajar*," in *Literary Cultures of the Civil War*, edited by Timothy Sweet (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 207–24; Cindy Weinstein, "Chapter Three: Heaven's Tense: Narration in *The Gates Ajar*," in *Time, Tense, and American Literature: When Is Now?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 64–82.

[130] This collection was a response to physician Edward Hammond Clarke's *Sex in Education or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* (1873), which argued using "physiological details" and "clinical illustrations" that educating women drains them of resources they need to maintain their sexual virility. The organizer of the collection was Julia Ward Howe, best known as the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," composed during the Civil War.

[131] Phelps received $750 and James received $400. The collection was entitled *The Whole Family.* John Crowley, *The Dean of American Letters: The Late Career of William Dean Howells* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 97.

[132] Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps,* 125.

fiction in her autobiography *Chapters from a Life* (1896) can be difficult to accept as serious or meaningful. Phelps's divisions are two-fold. First, she differentiates the "Sunday school . . . hackwork" that she performed quickly for money from the careful theological exposition that she undertook in *The Gates Ajar*, written and rewritten "so many times that I could have said it by heart."[133] Second, she separates *The Gates Ajar*, an "imperfect and youthful" piece in her retrospective analysis, from the "maturer" and more consciously feminist fiction that she produced later in her career. In her estimation, this later fiction includes *Doctor Zay* and *Silent Partner*. But the category also includes *Beyond the Gates* and *The Gates Between*, texts written *after* those that contemporary scholarship tends to apportion as Phelps's late-century realist work.[134]

This chapter takes Phelps's self-categorizations as a starting place for reworking contemporary theories of literary realism. What is it about the structure of literary study, I ask, that makes divisions between realist and religious fiction seem so obvious, so natural, so endemic to the texts themselves that even texts written coterminously by the same author can end up kindling two distinct sets of readings? This chapter suggests that its roots lie in literary study's self-crafted identity as a secular discipline. I argue that the field has projected onto literary realism the secular traits on which it must focus to establish itself a professional discipline apart from theology.[135] It has made realism into religious fiction's opposite because that secures realism as a safe object for its analysis. In practice, this has often meant associating realism with empiricism and materialism. Realist fiction, we say, represents individuals' direct

[133] Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 100.
[134] As she writes in her autobiography, "I have a little tenderness for these two dreams of the life to be." Ibid., 271.
[135] For more on this history of literary study's professionalization, see Michael W. Kaufmann, "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession," *New Literary History*, 38 (2007).

experiences of a presumably immanent material world, with all its daily processes and social mechanisms laid bare.

In this chapter, I join scholars like Gregory Jackson and Jane Thrailkill in theorizing realism beyond this secular frame.[136] Using Phelps's *Beyond the Gates* and *The Gates Between* as case studies, I contend that postbellum realist fiction was preoccupied with questions of reality and epistemology, of what is true and how we know it. Some realists explored these questions to discount or distance themselves from positions of faith. Others like Phelps used a combination of empirical and theological strategies to point to a layering of material and immaterial realities. In Phelps's second two *Gates* novels specifically, the characters' direct sensory experiences of otherworldly phenomena, the basis for Spiritualist practice, fortify their faiths in a Protestant worldview and offer readers a platform for doing likewise. Phelps teaches or reinforces for readers that "the real" encompasses more than they can observe on the surfaces of their lives. In the second part of this chapter, I use this Spiritualist-realist framework to revisit canonical theories of realism by Henry James and William Dean Howells. I argue that they, too, leave "the real" open for questioning. They, too, modulate between describing social, biological, and economic mechanisms at work in the immanent sphere and grappling with the immaterial forces—motives, emotions, attractions, perhaps even spirits—to which these mechanisms seem traceable at every turn. As I demonstrate in analyses of two other novels concerned with the Spiritualist movement, James's *The Bostonians* (1886) and Howells's *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), late-nineteenth-century realist novels characteristically questioned the boundaries

[136] Gregory Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), finds the roots of American literary realism in a long homiletic tradition. Jane Thrailkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), in turn, focuses on the affective and psychological registers of literary realism.

between the immanent and transcendent. They tested theories of reality far more expansive than scholars of U.S. literary realism have since attributed to them.

In proposing this nonsecular theory of realism, I contribute to recent rethinkings of genres as more fluid, context-specific, and audience-dependent than traditionally conceived.[137] I argue for the continuities between Phelps's so-called realist and religious novels and between her, James's, and Howells's general oeuvres. This argument, which is about a deep-seated rift in literary study between the religious and the secular, is also inseparably about gender, about the ways that women's bodies and bodies of literature have historically been read. The groundwork for my theory of spiritual realism has indeed been laid by feminist scholars, who have long argued that what we call "sentimental fiction" in U.S. literary traditions is often a version of realism by a female author.[138] This chapter builds upon that body of scholarship by noticing how generic hierarchies that privilege realism tend also jointly to privilege secularity and masculinity. To counter that naturalized alignment, my readings draw connections within and across associated binaries like male and female, rational and emotional, intellectual and popular, and secular and religious. I also showcase how male and female characters combine reason, intuition, emotion, faith, and sensory perception in their quests to understand reality. Finally, I draw out similarities in the pedagogical functions of Phelps's, Howells's, and James's novels. I argue that, despite recommending stances of faith, uncertainty, and suspicion, respectively, the novels all teach readers to think beyond their sensory experiences, questioning causes and allowing for unknowns.

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[137] See for example Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge," *PMLA*, 122, 5 (2007), 1377–88, or, for a more specific discussion of literary realism, Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: A History of U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[138] For more on conventional hierarchal distinctions between sentimental fiction and literary realism and alternative ways of conceiving of the relationship between the traditions, see Joanne Dobson, "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," *American Literature,* 69, 2 (1997): 263–88, and Melissa Homestead, "Review: Did a Woman Write 'The Great American Novel'? Judging Women's Fiction in the Nineteenth Century and Today," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* 29, 2 (Fall 2010), 447–57.

Phelps's Spiritualist Realism

Nineteenth-century Spiritualism is difficult to define. As a religious tradition, it was an unusually empirical one: it invited adherents to investigate otherworldly phenomena through repeatable methods like ghost rappings, séance meetings, and mesmerist demonstrations.[139] Spiritualists emphasized heavenly bodies' potential for sensory experience and drew comparisons between spirit communication and telegraphy and electricity, two scientific projects underway at the time.[140] They also rejected supernatural explanations for spiritual phenomenon, preferring instead to see the heavens as subject to the same natural laws as the earthly realm. Because of these consciously empirical methods, Spiritualism did not always register as a religious movement to the wider culture. Rather, it served variously as a religion and a science, a reform movement and a medical practice, an all-inclusive cosmology and an entertaining spectacle. Historians traditionally reserve the term Spiritualists, capital 'S', to refer to people who identified the movement as their religion. However, considering the number of people like Phelps who incorporated Spiritualist beliefs seamlessly into otherwise Protestant faiths, even that designation becomes slippery. In this project I refer to Spiritualism consistently in the uppercase to acknowledge that slipperiness. In the novels that I examine, Spiritualism the religion and spiritualism the science or source of entertainment continually bleed into one another. The categories seem to say more about contemporary understandings of religion as an isolatable feature within a secular frame than about nineteenth-century worldviews.

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[139] For more on Spiritualism's attempts to revitalize Protestantism through empirical methods, see Justine Murison, *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 140. This is not to say that Spiritualists' uses of empiricism were universally accepted within scientific communities. As Murison describes, the nascent field of neurology countered the spiritualists' claims (and established itself as a discipline) by ironically denouncing what they deemed "naïve empiricism" as a scientific method. They argued that induction alone was insufficient for determining scientific truths. Thus they established a position for themselves as scientific "experts." Murison, 138, 16, 160.

[140] Ibid., 141, 142.

Because of Spiritualism's internal slipperiness, assessments of its size vary widely. In the nineteenth century, estimates ranged from a few hundred thousand to 11 million, a staggering difference out of a total population of 25 million.[141] Many of these Spiritualists were also practicing Protestants, and, at least in the beginning of the movement, most lived in the Northeast. [142] Most were also white, although Native Americans and African Americans often shared and sometimes influenced Spiritualist beliefs without self-identifying with the movement.[143] Similarly, although Spiritualism attracted followers from all classes—the Lincolns held a séance at the White House after their son Willie died, for example—the majority of its declared followers were lower- and middle-class Americans, who sometimes blended Spiritualist with folk or occult traditions.[144] In short, Spiritualism's expressions differed greatly between adherents and across communities.

The movement also changed steadily across its approximately fifty-year history. Although it had its earliest origins in Native American spirituality and Shakerism, Spiritualism burst onto the national scene in 1848 when two adolescent sisters in Rochester, New York, professed to speak with spirits through rappings on their family's walls. With the help of their neighbors, radical Quakers and prominent abolitionists Amy and Isaac Post, the teenagers' private reports grew into organized meetings and then public lectures.[145] Within months, thousands of Americans were participating in aspects of the movement, including through public lectures, camp meetings, private séance gatherings, and home instructional books. Spiritualism

[141] Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd edition (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 25, 220. The second, larger estimate is that of Emma Hardinge, a Spiritualist practitioner and advocate who wrote the first recognized history of the movement, *Modern American Spiritualism*, in 1869. She recognized Spiritualism as a religion, helping to solidify its status as such.
[142] Ibid., 29. Spiritualism's geographic spread changed after the Civil War. Prior to the war, the links between Spiritualism and abolitionism deterred some potential Southern followers.
[143] Ibid., 28.
[144] Ibid., 27, 28.
[145] Ibid., 15.

offered Americans a comforting alternative to the rigors and mysteries of Calvinist theology, a form of certainty about the afterlife that was welcomed in the 1850s and took on new meaning in the aftermath of the Civil War. Spiritualism also promoted an optimism about humans' worth and collective progress, making it an appealing correlative to reform efforts like abolitionism and the women's movement. It is not hard to imagine, therefore, as Ann Braude proposes, that Spiritualism was "ubiquitous" in America for much of the nineteenth century.[146] While the movement lost some of its momentum by the 1880s (the decade in which Phelps's later two *Gates* novels were published), its presence persisted, albeit in some altered forms, well into the 1890s.[147]

The theology in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Gates* series is a Spiritualist-Protestant hybrid. Spiritualists saw heaven as a series of successive spheres, through which all people pass at different rates depending upon how much reforming they need to reach an ideal spiritual state.[148] Taken to its logical end, this cosmology negates the need for a redeemer and thus for a Christian belief in Jesus Christ. But Phelps does not follow Spiritualism to that conclusion. Rather, in her novels, the characters' spiritual growth in the afterlife depends upon Jesus's grace. Phelps combines Spiritualism's progressive cosmology and belief in the materiality of heaven with a Protestant emphasis on biblical authority and individuals' intuition. Although some theologians, including Phelps's father, a prominent Congregationalist minister and leading figure at Andover Seminary, believed that Spiritualism was incompatible with Protestant worldviews, in practice,

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[146] Ibid., 2.

[147] Catherine Albanese and Molly McGarry both suggest that the supposed decline of Spiritualism in the late-nineteenth century was partially a dispersal, in which previous followers transferred their loyalties to new, "drier" metaphysical traditions such as Theosophy, Christian Science, or the New Thought movement. Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 257; Molly McGarry, *The Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 5.

[148] This cosmology was laid out for Spiritualists in detail in Andrew Jackson Davis's six-volume Spiritualist manifesto *The Great Harmonia* (1850–1861). Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit,* 141.

nineteenth-century believers often blended the two as a matter of course. In Phelps's case, we might even say the two were mixed in her blood. Phelps's maternal grandfather was a theologian who helped introduce German higher criticism, a crucial foundation for the rise of liberal Protestantism in the U.S., to Andover Seminary in 1810. Her paternal grandfather, on the other hand, was a revivalist preacher who in 1850 experienced a seven-month-long series of spirit visitations that became widely known as the Stratford Rappings.[149] Although Phelps was herself raised firmly within the Congregationalist church, she recalls in her autobiography remaining curiously open to stories of her paternal grandfather's Spiritualist encounters, both as a child and afterward.[150] In her experiences, Spiritualism and Protestantism could complement one another's premises, strengthening, not threatening, each other's explanatory power and emotional appeal.

Phelps's *Gates* novels offer readers versions of that appealing hybridized theology. In *The Gates Ajar,* Phelps's earliest and most famous Spiritualist novel, the protagonists come to believe in a Spiritualism-inflected afterlife by reading their bibles and trusting their own reason and intuition. In *Beyond the Gates* and *The Gates Between*, the focus shifts— from earthly protagonists who envision heaven to spiritual ones who experience it. Mary, the protagonist of *Beyond the Gates*, is a self-giving nurse and teacher who visits heaven in a feverish vision on her deathbed. Led through the afterlife by her deceased father, she realizes how trivial all pursuits for earthly glory are, and awakens at the novel's close with a new sense of "Heaven in [her] heart" and purpose for her earthly days.[151] Esmerald of *The Gates Between* is not so lucky to glimpse heaven's organizing principles before his death. The victim of a fatal buggy accident at the

[149] Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps,* 2, 9.
[150] Phelps writes in *Chapters from a Life,* 8, "My talks with this very interesting grandfather gave me my first vivid sensation of the possibilities of life. With what thrills of hope and fear I listened for thumps on the head of my bed, or watched anxiously to see my candlestick walk out into the air!" These hopes were never fulfilled; Phelps relates that, despite her openness to it, she never had a direct spiritual experience.
[151] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Beyond the Gates,* in *Three Spiritualist Novels,* ed. Nina Baym (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000; first published 1883), 231. Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically within the text.

novel's start, Esmerald realizes quickly that the prestige he has chased as a medical doctor on earth, often at the expense of genuinely caring for his patients and family, will earn him little respect in the spiritual realm. As he reflects upon his arrival in the lowest sphere of the Spiritualist afterlife, "I was in a strange place; and I was a stranger in it."[152] To find a sense of peace and belonging, he now must learn all the spiritual lessons he previously neglected, including how to care for his recently deceased infant son. In both of the novels, in other words, the protagonists' religious worldviews are shaped not just by faith but also their sensory perceptions: they see the spiritual realm and believe.

Phelps's Spiritualist-Protestant heaven thus becomes a prime place for asking questions about the relation between reality and one's epistemology. The novels are concerned with what is real and how characters and readers can discern it. Their responses to these questions, in turn, become their primary lessons to readers: the supernatural is the real, and readers can know it by testing it empirically (Spiritualism) *and* taking it on faith (Protestantism). As to the first lesson, the novels reinforce the heightened reality of the spiritual realm by drawing frequent comparisons between the "superficial" sensory experiences that are possible on earth and the more elaborate or impressive ones that are available to bodies in heaven (*GB* 334). Mary, for example, attends a "Symphony of Color" during her visit to heaven, which gives such meaning to the word "color" that she now recognizes its use in the "lower world" as a mere "guise" for a "fact" in the "celestial life" (214). Similarly, Esmerald has an encounter with Jesus that enriches his sense of the very nature of vision, in the dual sense of sight and knowledge or understanding. When Esmerald's community learns Jesus is coming to visit, they are "electric" with joy (329). Esmerald, though, cannot share in their anticipation: he is left "dark amid [their] spiritual

[152] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Between* in *Three Spiritualist, Novels,* ed. Nina Baym (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000; first published 1887), 304. Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically within the text.

vision," "blind" among their "blessedness" (331). The ocular metaphors situate Esmerald's story in a long tradition of Christian awakening narratives. In this case, however, Esmerald's blindness is not just metaphorical. Rather, the protagonist literally cannot see Jesus standing in front of him. As he writes, "No spiritual optic nerve in me announced His presence. I was blind,—I was blind" (332). Accordingly, when Esmerald falls on the ground praying "Lord . . . that I may receive sight!" and is subsequently granted "spiritual vision," the gift he receives is at once a form of sensory perception and a change in spiritual orientation (332). Looking up and seeing Jesus before him, he mourns of his previous earthly epistemologies, "The wholesome movements of trust I had omitted from my soul's economy. The function of faith was a disused thing in me" (333). His extraordinary sensory experience in heaven makes him realize his lack of faith on earth. His pursuit of scientific knowledge had distracted him from, not taught him about, reality.

Phelps's characters, then, awaken to the spiritual nature of reality after experiencing heaven's unique joys and spiritual demands. For Phelps's readers, that path to confronting reality is different. Readers must affirm or revitalize their faiths on the authority of the characters' secondhand accounts. Aware of that chain of authority, the characters devise what amounts to a theory of literary realism: they propose ways of representing what is real, assuming that "what is real" does not belong to the natural plane. To underscore the difficulty of that task of spiritual translation, the novels return repeatedly, almost obsessively, to the insufficiency of language to capture the characters' experiences. When Mary arrives in heaven, for example, she relates, "The whole canopy of the sky was a rainbow. It is impossible to describe this sight in any earthly tongue, to any dwellers of the earth" (170). She becomes all the more exasperated by the "peculiar difficulties" of her narrative responsibilities the longer they continue, admitting to

readers, “I have again and again laid down my task in despair” (202). Esmerald’s assessment of the “peculiar force” of his writerly “burden” is similar:

> Ordinary writers upon usual topics, addressing readers of their own condition, have their share of difficulties. But the obstacles that present themselves to the recorder of this narrative are such as will be seen at once to have peculiar force. . . . How shall I tell the story unless I be understood? And how will I be understood if I told the story? (286)

The quandary Esmerald identifies lies at the heart of his and Mary’s narrative undertakings. They must relate their experiences in ways that are meaningful to readers, yet the experiences disprove what readers take as their “realities,” their base points of comparison or evaluation. There is no way to coach readers across the divide.

Mary and Esmerald never overcome this problem of representation. Instead, they use metaphors, analogies, and familiar scientific terminology to give readers the best impressions of their experiences that they can. When Mary describes journeying into the afterlife, for example, she qualifies, “I use the words ‘ascension’ and ‘arising’ in the superficial sense of earthly imagery. Of course, carefully speaking, there can be no up or down to the motion of beings detached from a revolving globe” (157). Similarly, as she takes in her first heavenly sights, she compares them to her memories using neurological or phrenological terminology: she describes images she has “stored away perhaps in the front lobes of the brain, as scientists used to tell us” (159). By distinguishing between past and present forms of knowledge, scientific explanations and spiritual experiences, Mary suggests that even the most advanced of earthly theories are useful only as metaphors for understanding heavenly phenomena. Although such gestures toward an experiential excess are generally reserved for descriptions of the afterlife, at one point, Esmerald mimics the structure of the comparison as he recounts his earthly feelings for his wife.

"I loved her," he describes. "Science gave me no explanation of the phenomenon. I did not love her scientifically. I loved her terribly" (246). In trying to articulate the opposite of loving "scientifically," Esmerald forgoes trying to describe the quality of the attraction and instead just emphasizes the degree. In the process, he wrestles with what contemporary cognitive scientists or philosophers call *qualia*: something in his experience of love that cannot be translated into language or captured by scientific theories.[153] By raising this example, Esmerald provides readers with an earthly point of comparison for the spiritual excesses that he goes on to convey. If they have experienced what it is like to love "terribly," they can begin to imagine the spiritual realities toward which his story points. In asking readers to make this leap—to move from understanding what it said to believing what cannot be said— *Beyond the Gates* and *The Gates Between* teach readers faith as a reading strategy. They ask readers to accept the reality of the texts' spiritual realms on words alone, as imperfect or insufficient as those words might be.

Phelps's *Gates* novels with their spiritual realities do not fit easily into contemporary theories of literary realism. In efforts to liken itself to a science and in keeping with the logic of secularism, literary study has generally proposed that realities are empirically verifiable, and that anything empirically verifiable must also be physical or material. Phelps's Protestant-Spiritualist understanding of reality challenges these assumptions. In the essay, "What is a Fact?" (1880), Phelps lays out the difference between secular and religious boundaries on reality through a hypothetical conversation between a religious believer and a "nonbeliever." The nonbeliever asserts at the start that a fact is "a thing revealed or revealable to my senses."[154] The believer agrees. But, the believer clarifies, in his understanding, that does not mean all facts are physical.

[153] As Jesse Matz argues in *Literary Impressionism and the Modernist Aesthetic*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004; first published 2001), 11, the question of how to translate experience into language or narrative was key to literary impressionism, a movement within modernism.
[154] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, "What is a Fact?" *Atlantic Monthly,* 46 (Nov. 1880), 679.

Quite to the contrary: "We who believe cherish certain spiritual facts."[155] As he explains, "A fact is a fact, though it deal with the lowest phases of nature, and truth is holy, whether she hid[es] in a stalactite or an epic, a jelly-fish or an oratorio, a vivisection or a prayer."[156] It is in the context of this conversation that we might read Esmerald's concern at the end of *The Gates Between* that his story "will be dismissed as something which is not 'a fact'" (334). By distinguishing between physical and spiritual facts that are both equally empirical, the religious believer challenges his skeptical rival's— and contemporary literary study's— limited version of the real. Phelps's fiction demands that readers acknowledge spiritual and secular, immaterial and material realities.

In proposing this nonsecular theory of reality, Phelps enters into dialogue with leading literary realists of her era, whose investments in theorizing the proper realm of fiction prepared them also to contemplate the nature of reality. Henry James proposes in "The Art of Fiction," for example, that a novel is "in its broadest definition a personal impression of life."[157] In Phelps's autobiography *Chapters from a Life* (1896), she then asks James to take that argument to its next logical step. She begins with a theory of fiction very much like James's: "I believe it to be the province of the literary artist to tell the truth about the world he lives in."[158] In this creed, she notes, one might identify "almost the precise language" of a literary realist.[159] Yet, she continues, in her understanding, this statement alone tells little about the proper form or expression of literary art. As she evaluates:

> Let us say, it is the duty of the artist in fiction today to paint life as it exists. With this inevitable observation who of us has any quarrel? The quarrel arises when the artist

[155] Ibid., 684.
[156] Ibid., 682.
[157] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *The Art of Fiction,* Walter Besant and Henry James (Boston: Cupples and Hurd, 1884), 60.
[158] Phelps, *Chapters from a Life*, 259.
[159] Ibid. Phelps did not herself identify with the realist movement, nor with any generic label.

> defines his subject, and chooses his medium. The conflict begins when the artist proffers his personal impression as to what life is.[160]

What Phelps emphasizes in this reflection is that writers' starting points—the worlds they experience or the "personal impressions of life" they must strive to represent—are not givens from the outset. *The Gates Between* and *Beyond the Gates* convey her faith that there are instead multiple possible realities, worldly and transcendent, that artists might know to be true from their personal experiences. In the next section of this essay, I use Phelps's theory of realism to analyze the realities in two other novels concerned with Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century, William Dean Howells's *The Undiscovered Country* and Henry James's *The Bostonians*. I argue that, rather than the materialist counterpoints to Phelps's spiritual inquiries, the canonical realism to her religious fiction, these texts are lessons, too, in identifying realities that exceed the physical plane. Their immaterialities are just more psychological than spiritual, and the learned response they promote is less faith than uncertainty, in Howells's case, and suspicion, in James's.

William Dean Howells and the Morality of Spiritual Uncertainty

The highest or truest realities in Phelps's novels exist beyond the physical or earthly world. The characters model for readers the blend of faith and empiricism that they need to acknowledge and, ultimately, to orient their lives toward these realities. Within that framework, we might say the realities in Howells's *The Undiscovered Country* and James's *The Bostonians* likewise lie behind or beneath the physical world: they center in the psychological motives that drive characters to actions. Howells answers questions about the nature or origins of such motives ambiguously: he shows examples of characters acting selfishly and morally in turn, and the novel neither confirms nor denies the existence of a higher spiritual realm that can provide a

[160] Ibid., 259–60.

meaningful framework for the latter type of action. James, in turn, constructs a reality in which all high-minded ideals—religious faith, romantic love, or hope for reform—turn out to be forms of self-interest. His realist fiction teaches readers, in short, to think suspiciously. In contemporary literary study, this hermeneutics of suspicion is now familiar; certainly it is a more practiced reading strategy than the faith-based one that Phelps's novels promote. Yet, as this chapter shows, the basic structure of the novels' lessons in locating reality are similar. Both Phelps's and James's theories of realism ask readers to seek out a "realer" reality apart from their first impressions of it. As I'll argue in my conclusion, incorporating religious fiction like Phelps's into studies of literary realism can thus expand our understanding of the pedagogical functions that realism serves. Phelps's *Gates* series shows realism offering readers a source of hope, a cosmological framework in which moral or generous social action is not only possible but meaningful.

Howells's and James's concern with the psychological motives underlying individuals' actions may seem like a secular rewriting of Phelps's concern for the spiritual. But, in light of the male realists' upbringings, their fiction, too, appears theologically attuned. James's and Howells's fathers both belonged to the Swedenborgian religion, an ecstatic offshoot of Calvinism and close relative of Spiritualism that saw evil and good as actively at battle in the world and tasked individuals with choosing sides.[161] As adults, James and Howells rejected their fathers' beliefs and, unlike Phelps, did not replace them with consistent religious worldviews of their own.[162] Yet they remained curious about the otherworldly and spirit communication throughout their adult lives. Biographer Leon Edel describes how a curious James attended

[161] Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 12.
[162] Rodney Olsen, *Dancing in Chains: The Youth of William Dean Howells* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 76; James Duban, *The Nature of True Virtue: Theology, Psychology, and Politics in the Writings of Henry James, Sr., Henry James, Jr., and William James* (Madison, WI: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 2001), 132.

séances, mesmerist demonstrations, and speeches by "ardent young reformers" quite frequently as a young adult in Cambridge.[163] He also kept up on new scientific approaches to Spiritualism through his brother William James, a pioneering psychologist and leader in the American Society for Psychical Research (SPR). (Henry even agreed at one point to read an essay of William's at a SPR gathering, an arrangement that, in light of Henry's skepticism, William called "the most comical thing he ever heard.")[164] Texts like Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), a psychological horror novella that derives its suspense from readers' uncertainty over whether the ghosts haunting the main characters are "real" or figments of their minds, testifies to his lifelong curiosity about the relation between psychic and supernatural phenomenon. So, too, does his late essay, "Is There Life after Death?" (1910), in which he wrestles, albeit hesitantly and uneasily, with the possibility that cultivating the human consciousness may offer a method for transcending death or achieving immortality.

For his part, Howells went through several periods of intense spiritual questioning during his life. From 1868–70, Howells embarked on a search for faith that led him to attend multiple churches, reread his father's Swedenborgian texts, and seek out William James's and Henry James, Sr.'s opinions on religion and reality.[165] He also participated in a private séance meeting, an experience that, as he describes in a letter to his father, "sounds absurd when you tell it; but I was badly rattled at the time, and I don't want to see any more of the performance."[166] After reading F.W. Evans's *Autobiography of a Shaker* (1869), Howells became fascinated with Shakerism, an ecstatic sect that abided by strict laws for nonsexual communal living and helped

[163] Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 118.
[164] "William James to Henry James, 1890. On spiritualist Leonora Piper," in *William James on Psychical Research,* 2nd edition, ed. Gardner Murphy and Robert O. Ballou (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishing, 1973; first published 1960), 101.
[165] Goodman and Dawson, *William Dean Howells,* 308–09.
[166] "William Dean Howells to William C. Howells, 15 February 1891," in *Selected Letters of William Dean Howells,* Vol. 3, ed. George Arms, et al. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).

give rise to Spiritualism. Howells lived just outside a Shaker community for six weeks before writing an article on Shaker culture for *The Atlantic* in 1876 and beginning *The Undiscovered Country* in 1877.[167] Around the same time, a friend of his, the radical reformer and utopian community leader Robert Dale Owens, wrote an article for *The Atlantic* personally attesting to the powers of celebrated Spiritualist medium Katie King.[168] Based on the success of Owens's first book on Spiritualist phenomena and his trust in Owens as a friend, Howells sent the article to print, only to learn just before its publication that King was a fraud. Unable to pull the article, Howells and Owens could do nothing but issue a small disclaimer apologizing for the error. The embarrassment was enough to drive Owens into an insane asylum and make Howells skeptical of all Spiritualist claims.[169] His uncertainties about spiritual phenomena and the afterlife, however, did not cease. When his daughter Winnie died, he once again began a period of religious questioning, becoming active in a circle of Christian Socialists and writing in a letter one night that he senses the room around him is "dense with spirits."[170]

Perhaps the deepest or most consistent lifelong effect of James's and Howells's early steeping in Swedenborgian theology was their fascination with human motives. Because followers of the Swedenborg Church believed that individuals could freely choose to serve good or evil in the universe, they devoted a lot of time to reflecting upon their own motives. In the Swedenborgian model of thought, self-love or seeking one's own glory was the root of all evil. Usefulness or serving others, in contrast, was the highest form of good. For Howells, the thought that he might be solely responsible for his own destiny was a disquieting one, which caused him to have a nervous breakdown as an adolescent and continually to question his motives as an

[167] Goodman and Dawson, *William Dean Howells,* 209.
[168] Braude, *Radical Spirits,* 179
[169] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past,* 106.
[170] Goodman and Dawson, *William Dean Howells,* 308.

author as an adult.[171] More to the point, in James's and Howells's fiction, the illusiveness of human motives and the seemingly hazy lines between self-sacrifice and self-interest would become regularly recurring motifs. As Howells professes in one of his theories of fiction, novels should "bear the causes which produce character, and reveal all the feelings and explain the circumstances that influence men to action."[172] They should be "windows" into characters' "brains," showing "subtle process of thought before they outwardly declare themselves in action.—Causes, causes, and again, causes."[173] James, too, was drawn to the immaterial underpinnings of the human condition, describing in "The Art of Fiction" that the special faculty of talented authors is their ability "to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern."[174] The "unseen" realities that James and Howells describe parallel those in Phelps's theories and *Gates* novels. In their models, too, realist fiction teaches readers to see or investigate reality from a new angle.

Howells's views on human motives and immorality in *Undiscovered Country* are the least confident or most ambivalent of the three authors' perspectives. The novel's protagonist Dr. Boynton is an avid medical mesmerist and Spiritualist, whose young adult daughter Egeria submits to being his medium despite her own growing contempt for (and fear of) Spiritualist activity. Through a misstep on a journey, a result of Boynton's absent-mindedness before anything Spiritualist-related, the two become lost, and wander homeless for a night before stumbling upon a Shaker village that offers them shelter. Egeria is, by this point, on her deathbed from the stress and cold. Boynton, on the other hand, is overjoyed to be in a community of spirit communicators; he cannot wait to show them his progress in the field. With time, however, their

[171] Olson, *Dancing in Chains*, 76, 153.
[172] Ibid., 207.
[173] William Dean Howells, "Literary Gossip," *Ohio State Journal* (Jan. 18, 1861), 202.
[174] James, "Art of Fiction," 65.

fates reverse. As Egeria experiences romantic love and the beauty of nature, she becomes stronger and more independent than ever. Meanwhile Boynton's reputation as a Spiritualist and then his emotional and physical health deteriorate. He eventually dies, but not without first a moment of awakening in which he denounces his Spiritualist investigations—"the whole system of belief" upon which he has based his existence—"a heap of rubbish."[175] In his grief, he cries out, "Here at death's door I am without a sense of anything but darkness and the void beyond," and then, paradoxically, after a short pause, "In the name of God—in the name of whatever is better and greater than ourselves—give me some hope!" (363).

Boynton's sense of being alone before a dark void, even as he also calls out for God's help, points to an ambivalence he feels about the hereafter that the rest of the novel reinforces. As I will analyze shortly, *The Undiscovered Country* yields only tentative suggestions for how readers might orientate themselves toward a potential spiritual reality. Rather than a secularizing moment, then, I argue Boynton's deathbed awakening is more of a psychological awakening to his own selfish motives. Spiritualism, Boynton realizes in retrospect, was not his problem. His problem was his self-centered pursuit of Spiritualist knowledge at the expense of the people around him, namely, the Shakers, "whose kindness I have insulted," and Egeria, "whose young life I have blighted" (362). The Shakers and Egeria indeed provide two alternative models for living morally under the guidance of spiritual beliefs or questions. In the case of the former, the Shakers reverse Boynton's sense of the ends and means of Spiritualist inquiry. Whereas Boynton investigates the spiritual realm out of a curiosity to know whether it's there or what it's like, the Shakers do so in search of a model for structuring their earthly lives. As one of the Shaker characters explains to Boynton, "We try to live the angelic life . . . to do as we would be done by;

[175] William Dean Howells, *The Undiscovered Country* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1880), 363. Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically within the text.

to return good for evil; to put down selfishness in our hearts" (167). The character's phrase "the angelic life" emphasizes the continuity that the nineteenth-century Shakers strove to create between earth and heaven through their communal style of living. As one 1878 article in the *Shaker Manifesto* explains, Shakerism is a yet-imperfect attempt at "a full attainment of complete heaven on earth."[176] Truth or reality in this worldview is ultimately spiritual. The Shakers' lifestyle on earth, one that wholly depends upon individuals prioritizing the community over themselves, is an attempt to replicate it.

Whether Howells succeeds in conveying this larger theological framework for his Shaker characters' moral actions is debatable. Certainly his perspective on Shakerism in the novel is positive, a stance that was far from given in an era when Shakers were generally regarded as religious eccentrics or worse.[177] Yet, in praising Shakerism's traits, Howells arguably divorces their choice or actions from their spiritual causes, focusing instead on their earthly effects. When Howells first introduces Shakerism into the novel, for example, he includes the following footnote, the only footnote in the text:

> In placing some passages of his story among the Shakers of an easily recognizable locality, the author has avoided the study of personal traits, and he wishes explicitly to state that his Shakers are imaginary in everything but their truth, charity, and purity of life, and that scarcely less lovable quaintness to which no realism could do perfect justice. (161)

[176] "Shakerism Pre-eminent," *Shaker Manifesto (1878-1883)* (Aug. 1878), 8.
[177] Historian Stephen Stein suggests that, because of Shakers' present-day associations with domesticity, contemporary Americans are likely to forget that they "were once a radical religious sect despised, hated, harassed, and sometimes physically persecuted by fellow Americans." Even the name "Shakers" was originally derogatory: short for "Shaking Quakers," it alluded to the sect's ecstatic worship practices, which included trembling, singing, shouting, trances, and falling into fits. The label has persisted despite that, in 1823, the sect re-identified itself formally as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), xiv, 3, 87.

The description contains, for one thing, a striking theory of realism. Here Howells suggests that the realist's responsibility has less to do with representing practical details or personal traits than with doing "justice" to "truth" in a larger sense.[178] In this particular instance, Howells locates that truth in Shakers' pure and charitable ways of living. At the same time, by keeping readers focused on Shakers' earthly manners, suggesting, through words like "lovable quaintness," that their lifestyles are more cute and old-fashioned than spiritually magnanimous, Howells arguably misrepresents the reality toward which the Shaker movement was oriented. His characterizations underestimate or diminish the motives for the Shakers' actions.

It is perhaps on account of this subtle slippage between morality and spirituality that Howells's treatment of the Shakers engendered very different responses from his Shaker and non-Shaker reviewers. When Henry James read the novel, he accused Howells of being too much in sympathy with the Shaker movement. As James writes in a letter, "You strike me, once you have brought in Shakerism, as not having made quite enough of it…; as having described it too un-ironically and as if you were a Shaker yourself. (Perhaps you are—unbeknown to your correspondents & contributors!!—& that this is the secret of the book!)"[179] James's jest that *The Undiscovered Country* is perhaps a covert spiritual autobiography suggests something of the difference between James's and Howells's understanding of realism. James seems to expect that Howells will approach the Shakers' ideals with a certain criticalness or suspicion, a stance that is consistent with his own treatment of Spiritualism in *The Bostonians,* as I will consider in this chapter's final section. That being said, while James thinks Howells paints Shakerism too neatly or supportively, the Shakers themselves were less than amused with the portrayal. As one writer

[178] Stephen Stein, *Shaker Experience,* xiv, identifies the same problem in representations of present-day Shakerism. As he writes, "At times, especially in the popular literature, we look in vain for any mention of the religious dimensions of Shakerism, or we find a mélange of sentimental spiritual values imposed on a material culture."
[179] "James to Howells, 20 July 1880, London," in *Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells,* ed. Michael Anesko (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 152.

for *The Woman's Journal* describes, "The Shakers think they might be more thoroughly understood; and certainly any system can be better appreciated when studied sympathetically, and its purposes can be best known from its friends."[180] According to this reviewer, the heart of the Shakers' complaint against Howells is that he misunderstands their purposes. The remainder of the article, then, is less of a literary review than an overview of Shakerism's teachings, an apparent attempt to set readers straight on what Shakers believe and why. Foremost among these corrections is attention to the Shakers' progressive spiritual orientation. As the author explains, "If we look beyond the surface, we perceive that these people did not leave the world's selfish joys for a mere whim, but from convictions which sprang from the depths of the soul and raised them above the ordinary prejudices of life."[181] Their motives, in other words, are otherworldly. They are moved to act selflessly because they sense this behavior fits into a bigger cosmic plan.

The Shakers' moral living is thus the first alternative to Boynton's selfish pursuit of Spiritualist knowledge. The second is Egeria's eagerness to let spiritual mysteries remain mysteries. As Egeria voices when Boynton urges her to contact her deceased mother, "I can wait to go to her. And she can wait, too. . . .What good does it all do?" (219). Egeria recognizes, as Boynton later does, that all of his Spiritualist investigating has brought him no closer to understanding the life hereafter. Furthermore, in service of that quest, he has manipulated Egeria for his own ends and sacrificed her well-being. As Boynton reflects, "I seized upon a simple, living nature, good and sweet in its earthliness, and sacred in it, and alienated it from all possible happiness to the uses of my ambition. I have played the vampire!" (318–19). By associating life and goodness with Egeria's earthliness and death and violence with his own Spiritualist strivings, Boynton points to the second possible path to moral living, besides the Shakers' organized

[180] Zulkika, "Shakerism and Woman," in *Woman's Journal,* 15, 38 (Sept. 1884), 395.
[181] Ibid.

religious certainty: having faith in unknowns or accepting spiritual uncertainties. As a part of his deathbed awakening, Boynton reflects to his friend, Ford, a long-time skeptic, "There is a text somewhere in Paul. . . 'We are saved by hope. But hope that is seen'—that is *seen*—'is *not* hope; for what a man seeth'— Very significant! Very significant!" (372). The passage to which he refers is Romans 8:24: "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doeth he yet hope for?" In his rough paraphrase of this biblical argument, Boynton points to the fatal (quite literally) flaw in his previous reasoning. His Spiritualist inquiries should have been *less* not *more* empirical. In presupposing that the afterlife was within his rational grasp, he ironically made it unworthy of his exploration. He continues, articulating a lesson that gives the novel its title: "We *must* doubt; we are better with no proof. Yes; yes! The undiscovered country—thank God, it can be what those babblers say!" (373). Rather than a road to disbelief, doubt appears here, and throughout Howells's novel, as a necessary precondition for a sustainable religious orientation. Boynton invites readers to follow Egeria's example, keeping the spiritual realm an open question.

The form of Howells's novel gives readers an opportunity to practice that open stance. At several moments, characters experience the same plot event differently, depending on their religious or secular frames of mind. In the first instance, for example, Boynton interprets a gloved hand that he sees at a séance meeting as evidence for *materialization*, a controversial Spiritualist practice in which spirits become visible as well as audible. His skeptical friend Ford, in contrast, thinks someone is carrying out an elaborate prank (51). Later, Boynton perceives the walls of a roadside inn to shake and moan with "the presence of the dead," while other witnesses accuse him of being intoxicated (156, 377). Finally, the narrator debates whether Boynton's "mystical passes" over Egeria's feverish eyes are soothing because of his extraordinary

mesmeric powers or his familiar touch (182). The first of these discrepancies is resolved when Boynton's landlord admits that she helped to carry out the gloved-hand phenomenon (98). In the other cases, however, the narrative progresses without explicitly confirming or denying characters' experiences; readers are left to doubt or believe what is real as they will. In this way, the novel formally models the lesson that Boynton and Egeria promote: readers are best to leave the potential reality of spiritual phenomena an unknown. The novel could well be commenting on its own lack of answers when it closes by instructing readers, "They wait, and we must all wait" (419).

Reading James's *The Bostonians* Suspiciously

As *The Undiscovered Country* shows, the immaterial realities of Howells's theory of realism are two-fold. They are psychological—as in, characters' motives, beliefs, and morals—and also potentially spiritual, although that second part is left uncertain. In James's *The Bostonians,* that second possibility disappears. Motives, here, are the immaterial forces of concern. And while individuals may seem motivated by ideals such as religion or love, in *reality,* as James paints it, those ideals are selfishness in another guise. While Phelps's novels teach faith and Howells's novel teaches uncertainty, *The Bostonians* teaches readers to approach any truth claims with suspicion.

At the start of the novel, wealthy social reformer Olive Chancellor receives a surprise visit from her male cousin Basil Ransom, a Mississippian lawyer, Confederate veteran, and adamant defender of both the patriarchy and white supremacism. Olive brings Basil to a women's rights meeting, where they meet the adolescent trance-speaker Verena Tarrant. While in a trance induced by her mesmerist father Selah, Verena offers a speech on women's

emancipation that captivates her audience, especially Olive. Motivated by an immediate physical attraction to Verena and lofty thoughts of "rescuing" her from poverty to serve the women's movement, Olive adopts the young trance-speaker as her protégée.[182] Basil, in the meantime, formulates his own plans for Verena. Although opposed to everything for which she stands, he is charmed by Verena's voice and believes he can lure her from the women's movement into marrying him. Olive, sensing the threat he poses to her own affections for Verena, responds by demanding even more of the young woman's time and devotion. Thus begins a battle of wills that drives both Olive and Verena, in turn, to despair. When Verena eventually yields to Basil's advances, the decision brings no promise of a typical marriage plot's happy ending. Instead, the final scene is one of bodily pain and emotional distress: Basil "wrenche[s]" Verena from Olive "by muscular force," and she follows him in tears—"not the last she was destined to shed," as the narrator concludes (349–50).

What Basil wanted from the relationship, though, was never happiness. He, like Olive and Selah, wants to "possess" Verena, both in the mesmeric sense of controlling her thoughts and the physical sense of controlling her body. Unlike these others characters, though, Basil harbors no illusions about the purity of his motives. As he asks one group of characters, gathered to hear Verena's first public lecture, "Do you suppose that I pretend not to be selfish?" (334). His actions confirm that he does not: when Verena begs him for the freedom to speak before the gathered crowd, he denies her request, berating her, "Don't ask me to care for them or for any one!" and "You are mine, you are not theirs" (343). For this frankness about his selfish ends, Basil serves as an important foil to Selah and Olive, whose insistence on their heroic ideals does little to hide the likenesses between their motives' and Basil's. Selah, for his part, swears that his

[182] Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000; first published 1886), 65. Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically within the text.

only role in Verena's performances is to induce her trances and has "no desire to draw attention to [his] own poor gifts" (101). "Poor," though, is the key word here, for, as the novel progresses, readers realize Selah is far more attuned to the "money in the air" at the meetings where Verena speaks than to her talents (82). His greed is such that, when Olive offers him and Mrs. Tarrant "pecuniary compensation" for keeping their distance from Verena, they readily accept (129).

For her part, Olive starts by painting the lower-class Tarrants as an obstacle to Verena's potential as an advocate for women's rights. She tells Verena, "You must be saved," and she sees herself as the heroine fit to do the saving (107). Yet, like Selah, Olive has her own reasons for wanting to be close to Verena, in her case, a "wild personal passion" that becomes increasingly threatened as Verena's romantic attraction to Basil becomes clearer (320). Olive eventually decides she must "take hold" of Verena "with passion, with fury," a commitment that, readers might note, foreshadows the violence Basil carries out in the novel's final scene (292). Olive's commitment to the women's movement and Selah's humble interests in sharing his spiritual gifts, then, offer parallel opportunities for James to propose the same suspicion: that claims to selflessness are forms of self-deception with abusive, even potentially violent, consequences. Selah and Olive both declare lofty ends for which they hope to "save" Verena's gifts. Yet, as the three-way tension between them and Basil rises, they increasingly struggle to mask the ulterior investments, financial, social, and psychological, that they have in the relationship. Underneath the characters' narratives of spiritual truths and martyrdom for causes, the novel shows readers a reality of untamed desires, irrepressible psychological needs, and exploitation.

To make that reality clear, James, like Howells and Phelps, teaches readers a particular reading strategy, in this case, a hermeneutic for seeing through characters' declared ideals to the self-serving motives at their core. As I examined with Oliver Wendell Holmes's *Elsie Venner*

and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* in the first chapter, much of this pedagogical work takes place through the novel's omniscient narration. James's narrator, for example, uses free indirect discourse to allow the characters to betray their own inconsistencies, as when Olive admits, at least at some level of consciousness, that her reform impulses came in part from an "immense," and we might add anti-democratic, "desire to know intimately some *very* poor girl" (29). Her romanticized sense of herself as a heroic reformer and her admission that she finds poverty fascinating or alluring as a concept are in conflict. The same tension emerges from the narrator's ironic and, at times, humorous commentary on the characters' thoughts or actions. When the reformers gather for a meeting, for example, the narrator comments, "They sat there as if they were waiting for something; they . . . were plainly under the impression that, fortunately, they were not there to amuse themselves" (26). The narrator's sly "fortunately" disrupts the seriousness with which the characters take themselves. By flagging the reformers' tightly wound self-understandings, the narrator positions readers to participate in analyzing their perspectives from a more-knowing external vantage point. The narrator teaches the readers by example not to take the characters necessarily at their word.

Perhaps no narrative technique serves this pedagogical purpose so well as the narrator's first-person interjections into the otherwise third-person commentary. The narrator refers to his or her status as the omniscient narrator more than two dozen times in the novel, sometimes using the plural pronoun "we" to interpolate readers into an alliance with him or her against the characters. When readers first meet Olive, for example, the narrator relates, "Miss Olive Chancellor, it may be confided to the reader, to whom in the course of our history I shall be under the necessity of imparting much occult information, was subject to fits of tragic shyness" (10). Although the subject of the sentence is "Miss Olive Chancellor," the observation conveys

less about Olive than the narrator's relation to the reader. By expressing the act of narration as one of "confiding" and the information narrated as "occult," the narrator draws readers into an exclusive circle, one whose members have access to privileged knowledge. Significantly, this circle excludes the characters themselves. In the same opening scene, the narrator suggests that Basil's thoughts "were not present to him as definitely as I have written them" (11). As the narrator contrasts Basil's limited self-knowledge with his or her own omniscience, readers are made keenly aware of their own unique insights into Basil's consciousness. The narrator positions the reader as a confidant who, like the narrator, knows more and sees further than the characters do.

Sometimes the narrator expresses this confidence explicitly: Mrs. Tarrant, "as we know," is confusing to Verena, or Olive, "as we know," believes Verena is unconcerned with her dignity (59, 296). At other times the readers' relationship to the narrator's specialized knowledge is only implied. After Olive meets the son of a New York City socialite who is also one of Verena's courters, the narrator conveys, "She knew by this time (I can scarcely tell how, since Verena could give her no report), exactly what sort of youth Mr. Burrage was: he was weakly pretentious, softly original" (131). Here the narrator interrupts Olive's thoughts, as conveyed through free indirect discourse, to share a perspective that undermines her credibility as an impartial judge. The interruption does not contain a counterview of Mr. Burrage for readers to accept, nor necessarily imply that Olive is wrong in her judgment. Instead the narrator instructs readers on why or how they might treat Olive's claims with suspicion: they might question her sources, for example, or her quickness to make judgments. In the process, the narrator teaches readers that they, like the narrator, are more discerning or critical than the characters. By the time readers encounter Olive and Verena on the brink of despair, then, they can see, as the narrator

suggests, that "Olive was able to a certain extent to believe what she wished to believe. . . . If she had been less afraid, she would have read things more clearly; she would have seen that we don't run away from people unless we fear them and that we don't fear them unless we know that we are unarmed" (292). In this passage, the novel's pedagogy and its critique of Olive come together. Olive, readers can conclude, is not a good reader like "we" are.

What defines a good reader in James's novel, as in Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* and Holmes's *Elsie Venner*, is critical distance. Olive is too emotionally invested to "read . . . clearly." She does not look past "what she wished to believe." Good readers, in contrast, remain skeptical; they ask questions of what they see. The narrator exemplifies this distance when representing the characters. When Olive accuses Basil of remaining untouched by Verena's speech for the women's movement, the narrator remarks, "I know not whether Basil was touched, but he said, with every appearance of a conciliatory purpose—'I wish to thank [Verena] for all the interesting information she has given me this evening'" (215). In distinguishing between depths and appearances, the narrator sets him or herself apart from characters, who try to read one another based on surface-level words or gestures. Certainly the narrator knows that Basil was not "touched" by Olive's words; by this point, the narrator's omniscience is firmly established. However, the detachedness of the phrase "I know not" helps characterize the narrator as one who stands apart from the characters' emotional investments, one whose judgment will not be clouded by their idealism or desires.

It is against this picture of knowing narrators and an exposed reality of selfish psychological drives that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's image of a spiritual reality—one that gives structure or meaning to the characters' earthly lives—becomes striking. The pedagogical ends of James's and Phelps's realisms are structurally similar: both teach ways of reading the physical

world with immaterial realities in mind. But to study only one or the other of their examples under the umbrella of literary realism (usually James's) reduces our appreciation for the multi-faceted politics of that lesson. When James proves that characters' ideals are really self-serving ideologies, he instructs readers in an inherently secular form of critique, as Wendy Brown has described.[183] In modern Western contexts, Brown argues, the very concept of critique is premised upon a "historically necessary process of the mystification of reality," which the critic then "promises to scientifically decode."[184] To forgo performing this critical maneuver is to risk appearing naïve, unintelligent, or dismissive of the systems of oppression that result when fear and selfishness meets political power. *The Bostonians* guides readers into a critical consciousness that they can use to identify when ideals are serving oppressive ends.

If that is the only training in reading reality that they receive, however, they run another risk—of disallowing that religious faiths and ideals of reform can be effective catalysts of social change. In *The Bostonians,* Spiritualist trance speaking is neither "real," in the sense of actually transmitting otherworldly messages, nor empowering, in the sense of creating platforms for female mediums' voices. Feminist historians then and now, however, have argued otherwise, showing how Spiritualism and the women's rights movement were intimately connected in the nineteenth century, drawn together by their interests in social progress, individual autonomy, and female leadership. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's *History of Woman Suffrage* (1880), for example, asserts that "the only religious sect in the world that has recognized the equality of women is the Spiritualists."[185] More recently, Ann Braude has argued that trance-speaking was a relatively common practice in the early women's movement because it offered a

[183] Wendy Brown, "Introduction," in *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech,* ed. Talal Asad (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).
[184] Ibid., 12.
[185] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage,* Vol. 3 (Rochester, NY: Fowler & Wells; first published 1881–1902), 530.

creative workaround for cultural objections to female public speaking. The best trance speakers or vessels for spirits' messages, Spiritualists established, were people who were nervous, passive, effeminate, weak, and uneducated—all the traits stereotypically associated with nineteenth century women and people of color.[186] Spiritualism thus created public audiences for often silenced voices. To read the movement only suspiciously, as James's narrative encourages, is to remain closed to that subversive potential.

Phelps's *Gates* novels offer a site for practicing a more constructive balance of reading strategies. Following James's lessons, contemporary critics have been quick to point out the ideological work of Phelps's heavenly ideals, how her vision of trim houses and loving families sounds a lot like a white New England Protestant bourgeois fantasy. In the case of Phelps's earliest novel, *The Gates Ajar,* it is hard to perform anything *but* that reading, with good reason: we might think, for example, of how the white female protagonist justifies sometimes "careless[ly] stepping" on her African American servant's rights because the latter will someday "rise from our touch" and thrive in heaven.[187] In the second two novels of the *Gates* trilogy, however, the relationship between earthly actions and heavenly rewards reverses—a change that was, as Phelps notes in her autobiography, a conscious revision of her younger self's politics.[188] Indeed Mary and Esmerald's chief lesson in the afterlife is that people's concern for and generosity toward the disenfranchised on earth determines the ease and rate of their transition into heaven. Before Mary's sojourn in the afterlife, she worries that her lack of an "ecstatic

[186] Braude, *Radical Spirits,* 85. Sojourner Truth and Cora Hatch's speeches about the equality of souls at the 1866 National Spiritualist Convention are two notable examples. As John Kucich, *Ghostly Communion,* 118, notes, Hatch was a young woman known for her beauty and exquisite voice, and may well have served as a model for James's Verena.

[187] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar,* in *Three Spiritualist Novels,* ed. Nina Baym (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000; first published 1868), 90.

[188] Phelps, *Chapters from a Life,* 99. Describing the period in which she wrote *The Gates Ajar,* Phelps writes, "At this time, be it said, I had no interest at all in any especial movement for the peculiar needs of women as a class. I was reared in circles which did not concern themselves with those whom we should probably have called agitators."

temperament" or a "higher order of piety" will keep her from finding a comfortable spiritual home (142). In the reality of the spiritual realm, however, she is honored for her work as a schoolteacher, a volunteer nurse in the Civil War, a member of the Freedman's Bureau, and an advocate for health and labor reform (142, 192). Readers do not find out how long Mary lives after her spiritual journey, to know whether she can rearrange her earthly priorities to match heaven's expectations. For readers, though, who definitely *can* return from Mary's spiritual journey to their earthly lives, the novel offers a framework, predicated on religious belief, for social action. If, following James, literary study does not allow this spiritual motive to be "real," whether in the sense of personally meaningful or politically effective, we understate the pedagogical potential of literary realism. Phelps's spiritual realism invites us to expand our reading strategies.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERARY HISTORY AND THE VARIETIES OF TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY U.S. PROTESTANT EXPERIENCE

Near the start of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* first delivered as a lecture series from 1901–02 and published later that second year, James circumscribes his lectures' subject by distinguishing what he calls "personal religion" from what he calls "institutional religion."[189] Personal religion is constituted by "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[190] Institutional religion, on the other hand, is communal and rooted in ritual or tradition: its chief concerns are "worship and sacrifice, procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology and ceremony, and ecclesiastical organization."[191] James's interests as a psychologist, he clarifies, are strictly in the former. Psychology acquires its disciplinary identity from studying psychic phenomena, he asserts, and these phenomena manifest at the level of individual minds. Other emerging disciplines, such as sociology or ethnography, can study religions as social forces working in communities. When he discusses "religion," he means his "own narrow view of what religion shall consist in *for the purposes of these lectures*," religion "as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it."[192]

In this opening, James asks his audience to focus on personal religiosity as something of a thought experiment, to play along with him as he defines religion only for his present purposes. Yet in James's remaining lectures, not to mention most other major psychology texts of his day, personal religion hardly registers as something to be taken up "arbitrarily" among other possible

[189] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* in *William James: Writings 1902–1910* (New York: The Library of America, 1987; first delivered 1901–02), 34.
[190] Ibid., 36.
[191] Ibid., 29.
[192] Ibid., 34, 36.

choices. To the contrary, early psychologies of religion often explicitly hierarchize personal and institutional religion, honoring personal religion as the truer or more essential variety. As James evaluates in one of his later lectures, "I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products."[193] Similarly, early psychologist James Leuba writes in a groundbreaking article for the psychology of religion in 1896, "Never mind . . . the body of doctrines held by the subject of [religious] experiences; *mind the subjective fact in itself*. To it science must apply its tools, for it is the essence of religious life."[194] By this logic, Leuba and other early psychologists of religion elevate personal religion to the status of religion's "essence." The field's identity ultimately depends upon establishing personal religion as not just one "narrow view" of religion but rather the "common denominator" of all religious traditions.[195]

This chapter examines this distinction between personal and institutional religions as it manifests in both turn-of-the-century American novels and current U.S. literary histories. At the turn of the century, an assemblage of texts that have come to be called *psychological realist novels* emerged to probe and nuance psychological theories of human perception and experience.[196] This chapter features three case studies in that subgenre: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), and Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903). These novels, like early psychological theories, openly subordinate institutional to personal religiosity: they portray personal religions as both more

[193] Ibid., 378
[194] James H. Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," *American Journal of Psychology,* 7, 3 (1896), 309–85, 310–11.
[195] Havelock Ellis, *The New Spirit* (London, UK: Chiswick Press, 1890), 228.
[196] Although the term "psychological realist" is less common than other designations like "proto-modernist" or even just "modernist," I find it helpful for drawing attention to these novels' focus on the experiential or perceived realities of individual minds. For example, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Shorter Seventh Edition*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), 1697, uses the term to describe the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton.

genuine and more modern than organized, communal alternatives. In doing so, they offer just one perspective on the direction of turn-of-the-century religion, which circulated alongside equally adamant campaigns for a newly *social* religiosity, such as that in Charles Sheldon's bestselling Protestant novel *In His Steps* (1896). Contemporary literary histories, however, rather than recognizing this multiplicity, often reproduce psychological realist novels' accounts of turn-of-the-century religion, portraying personal religion or "spirituality," as it has since become known, as religion's single modern configuration. This chapter rounds out such histories, contextualizing the personal religions featured in psychological realist novels amidst alternative turn-of-the-century notions of religiosity.

In the first section, I analyze the solitary religious feelings featured in Chopin's, Frederic's, and James's novels as they respond and contribute to theories of religious experience emerging at the turn of the century from the field of psychology. The protagonists find organized religion to be hollow, old-fashioned, or even stifling. Meanwhile, sensory stimuli like music, art, the ocean, and sexually attractive men and women arouse in them uncommon feelings of awe, peace, excitement, and freedom. The characters understand these moments of emotional intensity to be also moments of spiritual fulfillment or transformation. *The Awakening* and *Damnation*, the latter first published in England under the title *Illumination*, even take the form of religious conversion narratives.[197] These intimate religious awakenings, unsettlings, illuminations, or transformations appear in the novels as the "very much up-to-date" alternatives to worn out religious forms.[198] The novels accordingly both hierarchize and temporalize the characters'

[197] By this I mean that the protagonists of the texts awaken to new ways of seeing or living, which they carry out throughout the remainder of the novel.
[198] Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986; first published 1896), 65. Subsequent references to this edition are made parenthetically within the text.

religious activities: they suggest that personal religiosity befits the modern, turn-of-the-century age, while organized religion no longer speaks to it.

As I consider in the second section, these canonical novels' arguments have only grown in popularity since. When psychologists and psychological realists distinguished between meaningful religious feelings and stuffy religious institutions, they ushered a historically-specific tradition—religious liberalism—into a new era, preparing it to become one of the prime religious expressions of the twentieth century, that of being "spiritual but not religious." Religious liberalism or personal religion was, when it began in the 1830s, a radical offshoot of liberal Protestantism. This is not to say its adherents were Protestants: they affiliated with and drew from multiple faith traditions, including Quakerism, Reformed Judaism, Spiritualism, and Buddhism.[199] Yet, precisely in creating their own hybrid faiths, religious liberals acted upon some of Protestantism's core ideals, including trusting one's inner light and celebrating religious differences. Religious liberalism was, in this sense, a post-Protestant movement; it outgrew but never entirely lost its liberal Protestant frame.

With personal religion's ties to Protestantism in mind, I explore Chopin's, Frederic's, and James's explicit associations of it with Catholicism. *The Awakening* is set in French-Catholic New Orleans. Theron Ware is lured from his Methodist faith by a Catholic priest and organist. *The Ambassadors*'s primary scenes of religious feeling occur in the Notre Dame Cathedral. This section examines the novels' Catholicisms as projections of the post-Protestant ideals of religious liberalism. One of the tendencies of religious liberals, readily exemplified in early psychologists' work, is to uplift non-Protestants as most closely fulfilling their liberal aims. The novels follow in this pursuit, making a decadent or exoticized Catholicism the ultimate outlet for characters'

[199] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 20.

individual religious experiences, a tradition conducive to the religious feelings drained out of organized Protestantism. Catholicism is, in their depictions, a modern, creative, elaborate, and sexually permissive *cultural* formation. It is *not,* in addition, a sincere communal religious tradition or theological position—despite that these, too, are expressions with which Catholicism has historically identified. Catholicism is ironically available for such romanticizing for the same reasons that it is subject to discrimination in other nineteenth-century texts: from a Protestant perspective, it is unfamiliar or exotic. All three of the novels' protagonists are characterized as Protestant outsiders to the Catholic cultures in which they have their spiritual awakenings. In turn, all three protagonists find in Catholicism an aesthetic and erotic register that Protestantism distinctly lacks. The novels thus selectively draw up Catholic cultures that combat the dry rationality and prudishness they associate with organized Protestantism.

From a literary-historical perspective, the trouble with this distinction between hip personal religion and everything else is that it has provided literary scholars with an excuse not to attend to organized religion at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet organized religion *did* have turn-of-the-century adherents, and they directed their institutions with increasingly conscious social and political motives. The Mormon Church, for example, reversed its views on polygamy in 1890 because, as President of the Church Wilford Woodruff declared, "the laws of the nation [were] against it," and the Church would otherwise lose its property and sovereignty.[200] Along similar lines, the Catholic Church encouraged working-class Irish immigrants to man the nation's emerging labor union movement, with first- or second-generation Irish heading almost half of the American Federation of Labor's 110 unions between 1900 and

[200] Wilford Woodruff, Untitled Address, Cache Stake Conference, Logan, Utah, 1 Nov. 1891. A transcript of this address appeared in a weekly Mormon periodical under the heading "Remarks Made by President Wilford Woodruff at Cache Stake Conference Held at Logan Sunday Afternoon," *Deseret News* (14 Nov. 1891).

1910.[201] When psychological realists and early psychologists depict personal religion as the religion of the modern age, they are choosing to focus on one prominent variety of religion among many. Theirs is one image of religion at the turn of the century, which circulated alongside viable others.

In the third section, I turn from the personal religions documented in psychologists' and psychological realists' texts to the social or institutional religions that fall outside their purviews. Spurred by an interest in the politics of religion, I specifically contrast the religious experiences represented in Chopin's, Frederic's, and James's novels with a burgeoning development in mainline turn-of-the-century Protestantism, the Social Gospel movement. My choice to attend to the Protestant center of America's religious landscape derives from recognizing the disproportionate social and political leverage that organized Protestantism had historically held, and continues to hold, in the U.S. Following Tracy Fessenden, I see that the supposed secularization of America's public sphere has created space not for religious pluralism, but rather for a more subtle and pervasive Protestantism, brought about by Protestantism's gradual blurring into America's values as a civil democracy.[202] Within this longer history, the rise and tremendous growth of the Social Gospel movement at the century's turn marked a new consciousness among many Protestants as to their collective potential. Developments like the reform house movement, the Sunday School movement, Christian socialism, and the Y.M.C.A. all pointed to turn-of-the-century liberal Protestants' freshly enlivened public-mindedness. As already seen, these Protestants were certainly not unique in having impulses toward public action. However, because of their numbers and privileged status in U.S. culture, their agendas

[201] Timothy Meagher, *The Columbia Guide to Irish American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 113–14.
[202] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 6.

did have unique momentum—a dynamic that contemporary audiences might observe similarly in the rise of the Religious Right.

The early twentieth-century version of this politically motivated Protestantism is perhaps best encapsulated in Congregationalist minister Charles Sheldon's best-selling novel *In His Steps* (1896). *In His Steps* originated as a sermon series, which Sheldon delivered to the acclaim of his Topeka congregation before publishing it in narrative form.[203] The story's protagonists are a couple of ministers, who challenge their congregants to make decisions in their lives by first asking, "What would Jesus do?"—a phrase Sheldon coined. Similarly to the protagonists in Chopin's, James's, and Frederic's novels, the characters who accept the challenges are at moments filled with religious feelings. Their responses to these experiences, however, are very different from their psychological realist counterparts'. In James's, Chopin's, and Frederic's novels, the characters' religious experiences are private, and the characters' awakenings lead them increasingly to withdraw from public life. In *In His Steps,* the response is the opposite: the characters lead a nation-wide "revolution," in which Christians abandon their "self-contained habits" and enter the "open, course, public life" for Jesus's sake (48). Sheldon represents the Protestant church as a space in which the Christian characters can unite for public action.

In His Steps resonated with a twentieth-century reading public: it sold millions of copies in the first years after its printing.[204] It is also still in print today; we need look no further than

[203] As Timothy Miller relates in *Following in His Steps: Biography of Charles Sheldon* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 66, 18, *In His Steps* was Sheldon's seventh in a series of sermon stories. It was not unusual among his sermons for being published. Sheldon started printing his sermons as a way to help the hard-of-hearing in his congregation, but the demand was so great that he eventually just started publishing them instead.
[204] As Miller argues in *Following in His Steps,* estimating the exact size of the market for Sheldon's novel is difficult because, three years after it was published, another publishing company realized that the copyright on the novel was invalid, and dozens of presses in the U.S. and abroad began running cheap pirated editions of the text. Miller estimates that the number of copies sold in English was around ten million, and that the number of readers far exceeded that. Copies in foreign languages are more difficult to count but, to date, *In His Steps* is known to have appeared in more than twenty-six languages. Miller, *Following in His Steps,* 78, 86–87.

recent online reviews to see its current, often conservative Protestant audience.[205] Yet Sheldon's novel is virtually absent from today's general literary histories and so, consequently, is its vision of modern U.S. religion. When Henry James and his contemporaries characterize the novel as a psychological genre, they introduce one of the cornerstones of twentieth- and twenty-first-century genre theory. The novel is a uniquely modern genre, scholars like Georg Lukács, Ian Watt, and Charles Taylor have contended, because it features protagonists who infuse their worlds with their own subjective meanings. The novel is also, some argue on the same evidence, a uniquely secular genre: it is the genre of a world that no longer believes cosmic forces produce shared truths. Such theories effectively designate certain novels— namely, those that capture the personal experiences of liberal subjects— as more noteworthy, modern, or even literary than others. When James and others first articulated these theories in the late nineteenth century, they drove the writing of psychological realist novels. Now the same theories help preserve these novels' places in the American literary canon. Psychological realism registers, in many of our literary histories, as the culminating step in the nineteenth century's march from Romanticism to realism, the promising prototype of what the American modernist novel will become.

When it comes to historicizing turn-of-the-century American religion, then, today's literary histories tend to reproduce psychological realists' hierarchies, taking "personal religion" to encompass religion in all of its meaningful, modern varieties. The recent focus in literary

[205] At the turn of the twentieth century, Sheldon's argument that Christians should focus on social action over personal salvation appealed to liberal, as opposed to conservative, Protestants. Today, the text's call for a politically active Protestantism has an audience among liberal and conservative Protestants alike. That is because, beginning in the 1950s, Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists stopped seeing political involvement as a distraction from their ultimate goal (personal salvation) and started seeing it as part and parcel with it. As William Martin describes in *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 30–31, in the lead-up to the Korean War, many conservative Protestants were concerned about the nation's tumultuous state. Evangelical preacher Billy Graham played to this concern, working with members of Congress to lead a five-week Christian "crusade" in Washington D.C., culminating with a rally on the Capitol steps. Because of his closeness to many political higher-ups, including Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, Graham had a key role in growing conservative Protestants' political involvements. As Graham argued in 1951, "The Christian people of America will not sit idly by during the 1952 presidential campaign. [They] are going to vote as a bloc for the man with the strongest moral and spiritual platform, regardless of his views on other matters."

study on the "postsecular" exemplifies this trend toward privileging the personal.[206] Postsecular theorists like Amy Hungerford and John McClure observe in postmodern culture a "secular restlessness" that compels people to seek experiences of awe, fullness, or awakening apart from religious doctrines or institutions.[207] Like early psychologists, they approach religion, or at least "modern" religion, as essentially a way of feeling: experiences are religious or spiritual when they trigger an emotional rush or release. By centering their work on these spiritual-secular episodes, these "whooshing up" moments as Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly have memorably called them, postsecular theorists risk excluding social and institutional religions from their scholarly purviews.[208] As such, they feed a common blind spot in studies of turn-of-the-twentieth- and twentieth-century American literature generally. This chapter counters by analyzing the personal and social religiosities portrayed in turn-of-the-century novels as different responses to the same questions about religion's place in the looming new century. When we follow psychologists and psychological realists in privileging personal religion over alternatives, we sidestep religious institutions' uneven political and social powers. This chapter models how our literary histories might better confront organized religions' assertions of power in the American public sphere.

The Religion of Psychology

[206] By "postsecular," as I will show, I mean to refer to a branch of literary study that argues the contemporary world isn't secularized at all, but rather infused with a sense of enchantment or spirituality. Recently, scholars like Jared Hickman and Peter Coviello have invoked the term "postsecular" in another sense: to refer to literary study's status now that it has realized the secularization thesis is "dead" and needs replacing. While I recognize with Hickman and Coviello that secular theorists' interventions now extend well beyond just refuting secularization narratives, I sense that, outside of these circles, the secularization thesis isn't as dead as the term "postsecular" makes it sound. Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, "Introduction: After the Postsecular," *American Literature,* 86, 4 (2014), 645–654, 645.

[207] Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

[208] Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 200–202.

This section analyzes the personal religious experiences in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,* Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware,* and Henry James's *The Ambassadors* as they advance and nuance their era's psychological theories of religion. The psychology of religion was a new field at the turn of the twentieth century. As James Leuba wrote in an article for the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1896, "There remains a domain in which psychological science has not yet planted its standard: it has ignored the manifestations of religious life."[209] Leuba's critique is perhaps overstated considering that psychology had only gotten its start as an academic discipline a few years prior.[210] Still, his call-to-action was one that psychologists answered. Some psychologists, like Stanley Hall, designed controlled experiments through which to study religion. Others, like William James, studied religion observationally and via subjects' self-reporting.[211] These methodological camps were composed alike of positivists and materialists, spiritual seekers and organized religious adherents. The psychology of religion was thus a far-reaching subfield: it blended, at one end, with the Spiritualist inquiries of the Society for Psychical Research, a society in which William James took a leading role, and, at the other, with Sigmund Freud's readings of religions as developmental perversions. It was also a defining field for the larger discipline: its diverse forms helped establish psychology's methods, scopes, and stakes.[212]

What draws the subfield's many iterations together is a shared interest in how to define religion. Most early psychologists tackled the question by identifying a religious "essence" that

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[209] James Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," *American Journal of Psychology,* 7, 3 (1896), 309–385, 310.
[210] For an overview of the early history of academic psychology, especially as it relates to the study of religion, see Ann Taves, "Chapter 7: The Psychology of Religion," *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999).
[211] For an in-depth comparison of Stanley Hall's and William James's early influences on the field of psychology, see Christopher White, "Chapter Two: Fragments of Truth," *Unsettled Minds: Psychology and the American Search for Spiritual Assurance, 1830-1940,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
[212] Christopher White, *Unsettled Minds,* 134.

crosses multiple manifestations of faith. To be functional, of course, this essence had to be common not only to *all* religions but also to *only* religions—a dilemma of which psychologists were well aware. As Havelock Ellis, English physician, early psychologist, and pioneering scholar of human sexuality, conveys it, "How can I make clear to myself this vast and many-shaped religious element of life? . . . Can I . . . reduce it to some common denominator?"[213] The field's collective response was, "Not easily." Early psychologists identified several potential religious essences, all of them within the bounds of personal as opposed to institutional religion. Yet their definitions often blurred more than they established the lines between religious and secular psychic experiences. As James Leuba writes, for example, "No definition … making [religion] dependent upon particular conceptions, as that of God, of soul, of spirit, of immortality, can possibly be adequate. *The essence of religion is a striving towards being, not toward knowing.*"[214] With similar elusiveness, Ellis writes, "Whenever an impulse from the world strikes against the organism" and produces "a joyous expansion or aspiration of the whole soul—there is religion."[215] Finally, almost comically, American psychologist Edwin Starbuck introduces the experience of religious conversion as "a distinct feeling of something taking place."[216] These definitions make "religiousness," the psychology of religion's foremost disciplinary investment, a floating signifier.

The Awakening, The Damnation of Theron Ware, and *The Ambassadors* are narrative inquiries into these open-ended psychological theories. Early psychologies of religion consistently described religious experiences as emotional responses to meaningful or arousing stimuli. These stimuli could be the sacred objects of organized religious traditions, like God or

[213] Ellis, *New Spirit,* 228.
[214] Leuba, "Study in the Psychology," 313, emphasis original.
[215] Ellis, *New Spirit,* 233.
[216] Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion, an Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness* (London, UK: Walter Scott, 1899), 90; Ellis, *New Spirit,* 229; Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion,* 324.

the Bible. But they did not have to be. As John Robert Seeley, English historian and author of *Nature Religion* (1882), assesses, "It is not exclusively but only *par excellence* that religion is directed towards God."[217] Chopin's, Frederic's, and James's novels show a few of the many stimuli that could satisfy such theories: they portray how art, music, nature, and sexual encounters can evoke characters' extraordinary feelings of freedom, peace, or excitement. The psychology of religion offers a framework for characterizing these episodes as religious experiences, as the novels explicitly do. In turn, the novels nuance psychologists' visions of what counts as religion in the modern age.

Like early psychologists, the novels begin establishing their images of modern religiosity by separating religious feelings from religious forms. The protagonists all consciously distance themselves from organized religious traditions and institutions. *The Awakening*'s Edna Pontellier recalls physically running away from the Presbyterian worship services of her childhood (19). Theron Ware watches as "a wave of enthusiasm" runs through his Methodist congregation, and, instead of feeling moved, he is "saddened and humiliated" by the "spectacle" (154, 155). When *The Ambassadors*'s Lambert Strether visits Notre Dame Cathedral, he distances himself physically in the space and mentally in his assessment of the scene from the figures "for whom these dealings had a method and a meaning"; they seem to him like the characters "of an old story," out of touch with the present he experiences (207). These mindful detachments from organized religion serve as points of contrast for what are rendered as the protagonists' true religious experiences or awakenings.

The stimulus for Strether's religious experience is the cathedral where he nostalgically watches characters practicing their organized faiths. When he arrives, he reflects, "The mighty monument laid upon him its spell. He might have been a student under the charm of a museum"

[217] John Robert Seeley, *Natural Religion*, 2nd edition (London, UK: Macmillan and Co., 1882), 73.

(206). Strether senses that Notre Dame moves him—enchants him, even—but differently than the cathedral's Catholic visitors (207).[218] As Strether evaluates, "The great church had no altar for his worship, no direct voice for his soul" (206). Yet he finds its atmosphere, the unfamiliar quiet of its "great dim" nave, "soothing even to sanctity" (205, 208). This kind of dramatic emotional response to a space that others deem sacred is also documented in early psychological case studies (8). Edwin Starbuck observes, for example, that the "aesthetic side of external nature and of church forms and the like" is often the "most appreciated" side among religious believers, and he offers, by way of example, a woman who reports feeling "most reverent in a Catholic church, whether it is empty or during service."[219] Similarly, Havelock Ellis notes that thirteenth-century Gothic cathedrals make the "soul respond expansively," his definition of a religious experience, by embodying "the infinite world itself."[220] Following these theories, the Notre Dame Cathedral stimulates Strether to a religious state of being.

That state is characterized in *The Ambassadors* primarily by immediate and temporary feelings of peace or security. This, too, builds upon psychological theories of religion. William James, when he seeks to articulate the "essence of religious experiences, the thing by which we finally must judge them," settles upon a sensation of letting go.[221] "There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but not to others," James evaluates, "in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing."[222] In this moment, "the time for tension in our soul is over, and that . . . of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived."[223] When Henry James

[218] Strether calls them visitants, which can be a synonym for visitor but can also refer to a supernatural agency or apparition. The latter would be fitting with Strether's romanticization of the religious adherents.
[219] Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion,* 325.
[220] Ellis, *New Spirit,* 235
[221] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 48–49.
[222] Ibid., 50
[223] Ibid.

describes the motives that drive Strether to Notre Dame, he turns to the same language of immediacy and release. By this point in the novel, Strether has been sent to Paris from Woollett, Massachusetts, to fetch his fiancé's wayward son. He has since been swept up in what he perceives as the romance, lavishness, and moral complexity of Parisian life. Most recently, he has gotten himself caught up in his European acquaintances' opaque tangle of romantic and other affairs. Much like William James's "religious men," then, what brings Strether to the Notre Dame Cathedral is an "impulse to let things be" (206). It is an act of surrender: he is "giving himself up" to the church's "beneficent action on his nerves" (205). When the narrator calls Strether's walk to the cathedral a "pilgrimage," or describes how he sits in the sanctuary with "head thrown back and eyes aloft," the novel invites readers to attribute distinctly religious significance to his experience. The episode is not just cathartic but also a source of meaning or peace that Strether nostalgically wants but cannot glean from organized religious traditions.

Strether's experience of peace or rest is temporary; the feeling fills him while he is in the church but does not follow him outside. The personal religious experiences in *Damnation* and *The Awakening* unfold otherwise. They are moments with lasting consequences, moments that shape the protagonists' lives. As such, they are also moments that shape the novels' plots. *The Awakening* and *Damnation* share the formal structures of religious conversion narratives, a literary tradition going back in America to the early Puritans. Traditionally in such narratives, a non-Christian protagonist has an unusual experience, understood afterward as an act of God, that convinces her of her life's sinfulness and, accordingly, inspires her to become a person of faith. Edna in *The Awakening* and Theron in *Damnation* undergo similar transformations but in reverse: they turn away from, not toward, organized faiths in a higher power. The religions to which they convert instead are personal religions, centered in feelings of individual fullness

rather than communal traditions or beliefs. The novels use religious terms and images to characterize their protagonists' emotional responses to stimuli as part of modern-day conversion experiences.

Theron Ware's conversion is, in his estimation at least, a process of enlightenment and religious disillusionment. He starts the novel happily married and dutifully serving a Methodist congregation in small-town New England. Through his encounters with a Catholic priest, a travelling revivalist preacher, a sexy Irish-Catholic "pagan," and a non-believing scientist, however, he becomes disabused of his previous beliefs and values and can no longer perform his ministering duties. Responsible for his transformation, in part, is his introduction through these characters to "modern" philosophies like pragmatism, relativism, and positivism. When Theron thinks upon his first meeting with Father Forbes, the priest, and Dr. Ledsmar, the scientist, for example, he calls it the "turning-point of his career," the opportunity that "lifted him bodily out of the slough of ignorance" (131, 204). As the image of bodily resurrection demonstrates, Theron sees his education under Forbes and Ledsmar as both an intellectual and a spiritual transformation. He has found a more fulfilling replacement for his religious worldviews.

Theron attributes the remainder of his "illumination" to what psychologists call aesthetic interests or aesthetic emotions.[224] When Theron listens to Celia, his new Irish-Catholic acquaintance, play a piece by Frédéric Chopin on the piano one night, he murmurs "ecstatically," "in a ferment of awakened consciousness," "Oh, if I only knew how to tell you . . . what a revelation your playing has been to me!" (194, 201). Borrowing Edwin Starbuck's classifications for religious feeling, we might say that Theron gains in that moment a "sense of larger life": he is filled with "awe, the sense of mystery, reverence, love, and aesthetic appreciation."[225] The object

[224] Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion,* 272; Ellis, *New Spirit,* 242.
[225] Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion,* 324.

of his awe is not God, but, according to early psychologists' definitions, it does not have to be: religious feelings can be directed toward anything a person takes as divine.[226] Indeed music and even Frédéric Chopin in particular frequently arise in psychologists' theories as capable of evoking religious experiences.[227] Not all music has that effect on Theron. Earlier in the novel, for example, he listens to his congregation sing "Blest be the Tie that Binds" and feels uneasy or alienated by what he detects as their unthinking devotion to Methodism (132). But there is something about Celia's playing that makes him sense a new "spirit in the air" (194, 201). Havelock Ellis could well have been describing Theron's feeling of fullness or mental intoxication when he theorizes, "No other art smites us with so powerfully religious an appeal as music."[228]

That extra something to which Theron responds in Celia's music proves to be, at least in part, Celia herself. In Theron's experience of that evening, Celia's luxuriously clad presence and her soothing music blend together in a "weird voluptuous fantasy" (199). *Damnation* accordingly joins early psychologists (as well as many artists, theologians, and philosophers before them) in probing the relationship between religion and sexuality. The psychologist Starbuck, for example, finds in his fieldwork that Protestant conversions tend to coincide with the "doubt and storm and stress" of puberty.[229] This evidence leads him to conclude that conversions are "normal" parts of religiously inclined adolescents' psychological developments.[230] Others in the era depict religion as more pathological. Culminating a few years later in the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund

[226] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 38.
[227] Both Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion,* 272, and Ellis's *New Spirit,* 237, reference Frédéric Chopin in their discussions of music as religious inspiration.
[228] Ellis, *New Spirit,* 235.
[229] Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion,* 271.
[230] Starbuck titles Part I, Chapter XI of *Psychology of Religion,* "Conversion as a Normal Human Experience" (135).

Freud, these psychologists characterize religiosity as perverted sexuality.[231] Still others yet, including Ellis, suggest that "sexual excitement" or "the sexual instinct" might be a legitimate component of people's religious experiences.[232] These psychologists offer different answers to the same question: whether a link to sexual desire muddles the religiousness of people's religious experiences.

Frederic's novel joins the more skeptical of these psychologists, guiding readers to see, as Theron does not, that his heightened emotions are sexual *instead of* spiritual. Early in the novel, Theron listens with quiet knowingness as one of his Methodist congregants describes how he once confused religious stirrings with romantic desires. As the congregant relates, "I went to the church first to see a girl. . . . I actually believed at the time that I had experienced religion. I felt myself full of all sorts of awakenings of the soul and so forth. But it was really that girl" (121). Theron is not surprised to learn that the man's perceived religiosity is actually displaced sexual desire. The case indeed confirms for Theron his growing sense of organized religion's hollowness. When he has his own sexually titillating or "intoxicating" experiences, however, he abandons his skepticism and is quick to classify them in spiritual terms. The day after listening to Celia's music, for example, Theron reflects to himself that "both he and the world had changed overnight," that his "metamorphosis" was complete, that he now "stood in new skin" (204). Whereas Theron sees it fit to use images of rebirth and resurrection, readers are more likely to see a steadily growing immaturity. The same is true when Celia gives him a sympathetic kiss one afternoon. Theron reflects after the episode that "in all his life, he had never been impelled so

[231] As Taves documents in *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 259, by 1910, Freudian theories of the unconscious and religion as perversion had overshadowed many alternatives, such as James's theory of the subconscious, that had supported more curious or exploratory stances toward religion. Freud wrote *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,* which identified religious rituals as obsessional neuroses, in 1907 and *The Future of an Illusion,* which argued that humans created the idea of God out of a need for a powerful father figure, in 1927.
[232] Ellis, *New Spirit,* 233, 237.

powerfully toward earnest and soulful thanksgiving" (263). The "spirit of it" moves him to gaze up at the moon, and he thinks, "You are our God. . . . Hers and mine! You are the most beautiful of heavenly creatures, as she is of the angels of earth. I am speechless with reverence for you both" (263). Again, Theron does not question, as readers certainly do, the genuineness of his sudden reverence for the divine. The novel demystifies theories of religious experience that promote the truth or essentialness of personal religious feelings. Such feelings prove in Theron's case to be immature, self-flattering constructions.

Ultimately, then, the plot of *Damnation* hinges upon the irony of Theron's belief that his supposedly spiritual transformation—his turn away from Methodism and toward a more "illumined" state— is a change for the better. He thinks he is joining "an intellectual world . . . of lofty thoughts and the inspiring communion of real knowledge" (132). Everyone else around him, though, senses that "what [he] took to be improvement was degeneration" (323). Unlike James's or Chopin's novels and many psychology studies, *Damnation* pairs its wariness of religious forms with an equal skepticism toward religious feelings. Theron's proclaimed intellectual and spiritual enlightenment reduces in readers' eyes, with the narrator's guidance, to a form of self-aggrandizement at best or condescending belittlement of his community at worst. The novel questions whether all religious manifestations, regardless of their institutional or individual origins, are ultimately self-serving.

We might contrast that with Edna Pontellier's personal religious experiences in *The Awakening.* Edna, too, awakens to music and sexual titillation, among other stimuli. However, whereas Theron's supposed illumination makes him "for all the world like a little nasty boy," Edna's feelings of awe and excitement move her to a new sense of selfhood—a stage of self-finding, we might say, rather than self-serving (322). Religious feeling in *The Awakening* is

ultimately about freedom. To find herself, Edna must reject the "chains" of social conventions and allow the "divine" in art and nature to "reach [her] spirit and set it free" (87). This feeling of fullness or communion with the divine is so powerful that Edna eventually chooses death rather than compromising it for society's sake—the culmination of the novel's narrative of spiritual or personal religious awakening. Edna begins with what James Leuba identifies as the necessary conditions for religiosity: a "feeling of unwholeness" and a "yearning after the peace of unity."[233] In Edna's case, these feelings arise from having to fulfill socially prescribed roles as a wife, mother, daughter, and New Orleans socialite. The more she contemplates her social responsibilities, the more "an indescribable oppression" fills her "whole being with a vague anguish" (8).

That feeling of yearning is followed by a gradual but distinctive transformation. The narrator describes its beginnings as an externally gifted change in consciousness: Edna was starting "to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her"— a "ponderous weight" for "the Holy Ghost . . . to vouchsafe to any woman" (16). The reference to the Holy Ghost, although figurative, helps to liken Edna's awakening to an evangelical Protestant conversion experience.[234] As in Theron's case, one of the main catalysts for the change is aesthetic. Edna feels her first definite emotional "tremor" while, like Theron, listening to Chopin on the piano one evening (29). Filled with "the very passions" of solitude, hope, longing, and despair, she then wanders to the ocean and stands naked before its vastness (31). She swims for the first time and feels "intoxicated" by a newfound "power . . . to control the working of her body and her soul" (31). By psychologists'

[233] Leuba, "Study in the Psychology," 315.
[234] Starbuck pioneered the field of psychology's work on conversion. In *Psychology of Religion,* 92, he identifies and analyzes seven key aspects of the experience based on individuals' self-reports and his observations. First among these, accounting for 24% of people's total responses, is a feeling of "spontaneous awakening" or "spiritual illumination" "without any apparent immediate adequate cause."

theories, Edna's responses to the ocean and the piano exemplify the same psychic phenomena.[235] Music and nature are indeed so closely related in the psychology of religion that one of Starbuck's research participants can logically reflect, "In music, soulful pieces move me strongly. Chopin's 'Funeral March' seems to grow into me. In nature, our glorious sunsets, the ocean in its vastness, and all scenery on a grand sale, make me believe there must be some divine power."[236] Havelock Ellis, too, suggests an overlap in music's and nature's powers to arouse religious feeling. Music, he reasons, reveals "the most indefinite and profound mysteries of the soul."[237] Similarly, "a large expanse of air or sea or undulating land, or the placid infinity of the star-lit sky . . . can strike upon the soul and liberate it."[238]

Edna's awakening is to a newfound sense of self, one that transcends her social roles and for which she would sacrifice everything, even her life (31, 53). "She was becoming herself," the narrator relates, "and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (64). William James uses similar language of selfhood to describe the process of religious conversion: it involves "giving your little private convulsive self a rest, and finding that a greater Self is there."[239] In both psychological theories and Chopin's illustration, the feelings that accompany such a transformation are foremost ones of freedom. James writes that religion consists in a "new reach of freedom for us, with the struggle over, the keynote of the universe sounding in our ears."[240] Starbuck lists "freedom and independence" first

[235] In Jane Thrailkill's study of *The Awakening* and *Damnation of Theron Ware,* she analyzes how both the ocean and music work upon Edna in waves. Edna, unlike Theron, is able to relax and enjoy the bodily sensation of their rhythms. Jane Thrailkill, "'Mindless Pleasure': Embodied Music in *The Awakening* and *Theron Ware*," *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 177.
[236] Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion,* 272.
[237] Ellis, *New Spirit,* 235.
[238] Ibid., 242.
[239] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 106.
[240] Ibid., 50.

among his list of fundamental religious feelings.[241] Edna, with the help of a "mystic spirit," feels she is "borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast" (39). Edna's transformation is not only a coming-of-age experience but also, by psychologists' definitions, an essentially religious experience. Her awakening elucidates the personal religion that psychologists create through their theories of religiosity.

The language of Edna's secular-spiritual awakening also resonates with ideas emerging from the turn-of-the-century women's movement. When Edna's husband confronts a doctor about her "devilishly uncomfortable" behavior, the doctor's first question is, "Has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings?" (73). Although Edna has not actually "been associating with any one," the allusion creates its own link between Edna's awakened self and the strikingly characterized "super-spiritual" types of the New Women's movement (73). Often historians approach the turn-of-the-century women's movement by organizing its white middle-class sectors into two dominant camps, arranged along a religious-secular binary. On the one side, women like Catherine Beecher mobilized Christian truths to advocate for feminist reform within the domestic sphere. On the other, figures like Frances Wright, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Chopin criticized organized religion and sought to increase women's influence outside the home through means like the law and economics.[242] This latter camp often registers in feminist histories as the secular voice opposite Beecher's religiosity; it is heralded as the origins of modern secular feminism, for example.

Yet, as *The Awakening* aptly demonstrates, the condition toward which feminists like Stanton, Gilman, and Chopin saw women progressing is also a religious one. It is just religion

[241] Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion,* 324.
[242] For an example of this kind of bifurcated history, see Ellen Carol Dubois, ed., *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton–Susan B. Anthony Reader* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 6.

more like early psychologists understand it, a personal religion that spurns religious forms and resides in heightened individual feeling. Stanton calls upon women to cast off the chains of "false theology" and realize "the powers of the God-like mind."[243] Gilman contrasts a past when man "fell upon his face before almost anything" with a projected future in which Americans, led by women, establish a "free and growing church, branching steadily wider as more minds differ, and coming nearer always to that final merging of religion in life."[244] Chopin depicts Edna being driven from a church by a "feeling of oppression and drowsiness" into the open air where she feels "it must always have been God's day" (39, 40). In all three cases, the authors associate women's opportunities for freedom and growth in modernity with a turn from established religious traditions toward a personal reverence for their own minds or souls.

In the following section, I will confront the Protestant resonances of this preference for feelings over forms in light of the novels' overt interests in Catholicism. The novels' affinities for personal over institutional religions lie at the heart of religious liberalism, a tradition with roots in radical, early-nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. Despite this history, *The Ambassadors, The Awakening,* and *Damnation* all map the tensions between religious forms and religious feelings onto the different focuses or allowances of Protestant and Catholic cultures. They critique Protestantism's stifling religious traditions or communities while celebrating a diffuse and decadent Catholicism's conduciveness to feelings of fullness, peace, joy, freedom, and awe. This inversion results, I argue, less from the novels' respect for Catholicism than their unfamiliarity with it: they identify in exoticized Catholic spaces what they feel doctrinal

[243] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Speech before the American Anti-Slavery Society," May 8, 1860, in *Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony Reader,* ed. Ellen Carol Dubois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 80.
[244] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home, Its Work and Influence* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1972; first published 1903), 5–6.

Protestantism lacks. Catholicism thus functions in the novels less like a tradition than a mirror, reflecting back to the main characters their own ideas of modern spirituality.

Personal Catholicisms

When early psychologists and psychological realists deemed personal religion the modern essence of all organized traditions, they supplied new energy to timeworn ideas. Distinguishing between organized religious institutions and personal religious feelings was an impulse as old as Protestantism itself. In early nineteenth-century New England, it combined with an openness to religious plurality, a perpetual seeking of religious truths, to become the premise for a new religious tradition, religious liberalism. This section probes the movement's historical ties to Protestantism to scrutinize the Catholic-inflected personal religions represented in Chopin's, Frederic's, and James's novels. The novels depict Catholicism as deeper, more creative, and less authoritarian than Protestantism—a striking inversion of U.S. Protestants' traditional tendency to denounce Catholicism as associated with hierarchy, institutionalism, and conspiracy. Yet, for their seeming open-mindedness, the novels only endorse selective elements of Catholicism. These are elements conducive to religious feelings: the novels separate the aesthetics and erotics of Catholic culture, which they value, from the Catholic Church's communal worship practices and theological doctrines. The drawing of these lines suggests that what the novels most value about Catholicism is its perceived distance from mainstream, institutionalized Protestant-American culture. Whereas they know Protestantism's faults and limits well, they can envision Catholicism as their model of religion in modernity.

To understand the longer history of William James's distinction between personal and institutional religion, we might start by considering another two terms that begin to surface as

opposites in late nineteenth-century discussions of religion. As James lectures on mysticism, for example, he includes as a case study an entry from the journal of Englishman John Trevor. Trevor describes how, on his way to Unitarian Chapel one Sunday, he suddenly feels that "to leave the sunshine on the hills, and go down there to the chapel, would be for the time an act of spiritual suicide."[245] Shortly thereafter, he is overcome by an "indescribably intense" feeling of peace, joy, and assurance—an "inward sense of Heaven."[246] The case study validates James's hierarchical distinction between personal and institutional religion: only by forgoing a formal church setting is Trevor able to undergo what he describes as a true religious awakening. It also introduces a distinction, not carried throughout James's work but present in some other writings of his time, between religion and spirituality.[247] To frequent a religious institution would be "spiritual suicide," Trevor evaluates. The spiritual and the religious are here not overlapping terms but rather binary oppositions.

If separating religion from spirituality today seems obvious rather than paradoxical, it is only because the paradox has, since the 1830s, been markedly present in America's religious landscape. As Leigh Eric Schmidt explains in his history of American spirituality, the designation "spiritual but not religious"— now one of the most oft-identified religious identities or affiliations in America—did not emerge amidst a generation of hippies in the 1960s or '70s. Nor was it a "timeless" part of the American experiment, wrapped up in the nation's founding principles. Protestant-heavy colonial America was too tied to its Bibles to embrace a seeker-spirituality, and Enlightenment deists advocated for religious individualism as a political

[245] Qtd. in James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 357.
[246] Ibid., 358.
[247] The epigraph of Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Restless Souls* shows a classic example of this distinction, cited from Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* (1871): "The ripeness of Religion is doubtless to be looked for in the field of individuality. . . . Only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality may the spirituality of religion positively come forth at all."

principle, not a devotional practice.[248] Spirituality got its start as a specific historical formation, religious liberalism, in the 1830s. Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, radical Unitarians like Theodore Parker and Catherine Maria Sedgwick, and others including Reform Jews and dissenting Quakers refracted a Protestant emphasis on introspection and an Enlightenment defense of religious privacy through a Romantic prism, giving new value to matters of the spirit or soul. Although the movement was diffuse by definition, religious liberals could be collectively characterized as aspiring to individual religious feeling, valuing solitude, and seeking the transcendent in themselves and nature.[249] They also celebrated religious variety, borrowing beliefs and traditions from multiple faiths when forming their own practices.

The early psychology of religion had a direct, pivotal role in religious liberalism's transition to its present-day manifestation, the "spiritual but not religious" or SBNR tradition. Spirituality, as Schmidt argues, acquires its current meaning through its constructed opposition to religion. For the term "spirituality" to denote pure interiority and creative individuality, "religion" has to become so synonymous with "organized religion," so wrapped up in images of system and structure, that the term "organized religion" seems redundant.[250] The figure who first systematically introduced this terminology into American culture was William Wilson, or Bill W., the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.[251] Working in the mid-twentieth century, Wilson wanted to create a substance abuse recovery program that required participants' spiritual transformations but was not denominationally affiliated. Accordingly, when he wrote the organization's original handbook or manifesto, *The Big Book*, he referred to AA as a "spiritual

[248] Schmidt, *Restless Souls,* 19, 20.
[249] Ibid., 23.
[250] Ibid., 12.
[251] Ibid.

rather than a religious program."[252] This terminology was Wilson's. However, the idea he credits to none other than William James. As he recounts, reading James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* taught him to distinguish between organized religious institutions and an inner spirituality distinct from them. Wilson felt that James influenced his work so greatly that he would even refer to James as "the founder of AA."[253]

In recognition of this specific history, religious liberalism and spirituality can be most straightforwardly approached as post-Protestant movements. It would be misleading to call them Protestant. As already shown, religious liberals and SBNR seekers do not consistently affiliate with Protestant churches nor come from Protestant backgrounds. To the contrary, because their key aims include defying institutional boundaries, they tend consciously to synthesize their beliefs and practices from multiple faith traditions. They even tend to promote non-Protestant faiths as *better* models of their ideals than Protestantism, a Romantic inclination this section will explore in detail. What these liberal or SBNR types acknowledge less often, however, is how, as such, their spiritual quests are always already structured by Protestant motives. Regardless of the number of religions that they hybridize, the very idea of a personal religion grounded in individual feeling is a Protestant inheritance, which other faiths do not necessarily share. One of the historical risks of religious liberalism and spirituality, then, is that they so easily obscure their Protestant frames, assuming that their aims toward unity and individual feelings of fullness are universal ideals rather than inculcated values. To call religious liberalism and spirituality post-Protestant is to confront this lingering tie to a liberal Protestant worldview.

If Protestant ideals are inherent to the structure of religious liberalism, why then do Chopin's, James's, and Frederic's novels all imagine their characters' true religious experiences

[252] William Wilson, *The Big Book,* qtd. in *Spiritual but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America,* by Robert Fuller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 114.
[253] Ibid.

arising from, and being made possible within, Catholic cultures? The answer points, once again, to religious liberals' tendencies to universalize their values. As previously mentioned, nineteenth-century religious liberals derive their personal religions from hybridizing elements of multiple faith traditions. The process often leads them to celebrate non-Protestant faiths. It also leads them, just as often, to idealize or romanticize those non-Protestant faiths, praising religious "others" for achieving the focus on positive feeling that they deem essential to religious life. Thus early psychologists, as they develop their theories of true religious experience, repeatedly reference the same handful of non-Protestant traditions—Buddhism, Greek "paganism," and Roman Catholicism among them—to illustrate its highest expressions.[254] These faiths do not surface proportionately in the psychologists' evidence. Indeed the psychologists' extended case studies focus almost exclusively on Protestants. Yet it is precisely in these other faiths' non-specificity that they function in the psychologists'—and religious liberals'—arguments. By keeping non-Protestant faiths at a distance, religious liberals can choose which of the traditions' details to see.

In Chopin's, James's, and Frederic's novels, the romanticized religion of choice is Catholicism. Catholicism is, for all three protagonists, an unfamiliar or foreign object. As the novels carefully stipulate, the protagonists themselves have Protestant backgrounds, whether because of their upbringings or current cultural environments. Accordingly, when they enter Catholic spaces, they do so as outsiders, a positionality with two consequences. First, their perspectives are inherently comparative: they value most in Catholicism what they believe Protestantism lacks. Thus, whereas Protestantism is austere, authoritative, and morally rigorous, Catholicism is creative, lavish, and sexually permissive. It is this decadent Catholicism that

[254] See, for example, Seeley, *Natural Religion,* 73, on "Greek paganism"; James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 85, 36, 80–81, on Greek religion, Buddhism, and Catholicism; and Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion,* 325, on Catholicism.

allows for their personal religious awakenings. Second, as outsiders, the protagonists exoticize Catholicism, representing its mystery (to them) as an inherent part of its appeal. Catholicism appears in the novels as both a diffuse cultural force—an indistinct feeling in the air— and an elaborate conceptual framework that some individuals use to respond to the material world. It is not, in turn, generally associated with a shared, time-honored set of rituals or beliefs. Although some side characters are active members of the Catholic Church, the novels generally contrast these characters' structured religious observances with the protagonists' genuine religious experiences. Part of Catholicism's power to effect spiritual change in the novels, then, relies on its mystique. Its erotic and aesthetic charges are more alluring for the Protestant protagonists for being somewhat vague.

In *The Ambassadors,* the contrast between stringent Protestantism and exotic Catholicism is inextricable from a contrast between American and European cultures. These interwoven binaries play out microcosmically in the novel's characterizations of Paris, France, and Woollett, Massachusetts, and the "types" that come from each place (36). Woollett, the narrator describes, "isn't sure it ought to enjoy" (11). It does not openly court differences of opinion: dissenting views are "few" and "quiet," "as if people had been ashamed of them" (123). "A lifetime in Woollett," moreover, "has quite been observed as having" a strange effect on men of Strether's age: it makes them "liable to strange outbreaks, belated uncanny clutches at the unusual, the ideal" (289). Through these reports, the novel begins to portray Woollett as a disciplined and disciplining environment. It is then through Woollett's character "types" that the novel more directly establishes these traits as a legacy of New England's religious history. Strether's companion Waymarsh, for example, is, as the narrator describes, the "grand old American" type—"what shall one call it? The Hebrew prophet. Ezekiel, Jeremiah" (79). Ezekiel and

Jeremiah are both prophets of destruction; they bring their eras unpopular messages of doom from a justice-seeking God. By likening the "grand old American type" to these figures, the novel associates it at once with religious rigor and moral gravity, typical traits of New England Calvinism. Waymarsh then fulfills the role of such a Calvinist type in the novel: he rebukes Strether for getting caught up in what he sees as the frivolousness and moral laxity of European life. Strether, in turn, recognizes in Waymarsh "the control . . . to be exerted from Woollett" (248). Waymarsh represents the puritanical pressures that Strether feels lingering, as of old, in Woollett's culture.

The other predominant Woollett "type" in the novel is embodied by Strether's fiancé Mrs. Newsome and her daughter Sarah Posnock.[255] As the women judge Strether's choices in Europe, Strether senses not only Woollett's but also, more strikingly, a Calvinist God's critical eyes upon him. The novel initially paints Mrs. Newsome as a watchful divine figure through Strether's paradoxical sense of her absent presence. As he reflects, "He had never so lived with her as during this period of her silence; the silence was a sacred hush, a finer, clearer medium, in which her idiosyncrasies showed. . . . If he had never seen her so soundless, he had never, on the other hand, felt her so highly, so almost austerely herself: pure and by vulgar estimate 'cold,' but deep devoted delicate sensitive noble" (238). When Mrs. Newsome then sends her daughter Sarah to check on Strether in the flesh, Sarah emerges as the second member of the Christian Trinity, whose "resemblance to her mother" is so close that Strether remarks several times, "It had been for him as if he were dealing directly with Mrs. Newsome" (255, 284). By depicting Mrs. Newsome and Sarah as a feminine version of God the Father and Son, the novel suggests to readers that the severity Strether associates with Woollett results from New England's historical

[255] One other character is described as Woollett's "type," but more in passing. Sarah's daughter Mamie is recognized for her beauty and innocence. Implied is a comparison to the sexually experienced women in Paris (257–58).

steeping in Protestantism. This assessment of Woollett's culture is further particularized when the novel portrays Strether's response to the women's reprobation as one of a repentant sinner. When Strether senses Mrs. Newsome's non-physical presence, he feels "both held and hushed, summoned to stay at least and take his punishment" (307). Similarly, as he anticipates Sarah's arrival, he imagines that "he already felt her come down on him, already burned, under her reprobation, with the blush of guilt, already consented by way of penance, to the instant forfeiture of everything. He saw himself under her direction, recommitted to Woollett" (246). The religious culture that Woollett represents for Strether is not the liberal Protestantism that rose to prominence in New England in the nineteenth century. The Protestant culture that Woollett represents is a Calvinist one: it is a culture that holds human sin and divine punishment as ever-looming realities. As terms like "forfeiture" and "recommitted" denote, Strether sees his return to Woollett as a loss of freedom. This is not because the town would literally condemn or constrain him. As he reasons, "It wasn't of course that Woollett was really a place of discipline" (246). At the same time, Strether's sense of its watchful eyes and his readiness to repent before even being asked suggests he already feels its disciplinary power. The moral laws of Calvinist Protestantism diffusely but persistently color Woollett's culture.

It is against this representation of Protestant Woollett that the Catholic culture conducive to Strether's personal religious experiences emerges. Indeed the scene in which Strether is "sooth[ed] even to sanctity" in the Notre Dame Cathedral enters after both Strether and Waymarsh have already remarked upon the Catholic coloring of European culture. From one perspective, the two characters' attitudes toward that culture could not be more different: Waymarsh feels deeply prejudiced against it, whereas Strether exhibits a curious fascination with it. Yet, taking into account how they each structure their arguments, both characters conflate

Catholicism with European culture, just as they entangle Woollett with Protestantism. As the narrator relates, "The Catholic Church for Waymarsh—that was to say the enemy, the monster of bulging eyes and far-reaching quivering groping tentacles—was exactly society, exactly the multiplication of shibboleths…exactly in short Europe" (28). The antipathy that the "grand old American" Waymarsh feels for the Catholic Church is inextricable from his general prejudices against Europe (79). Thus, as he tries to characterize his distaste for the latter, one of the terms he uses to describe the bad feeling in the air is *Catholic*. Strether does not share Waymarsh's negativity. He does, however, share his sense that European society is charged with Catholic energy. When Strether attends his first European party, the imagery to which he resorts to describe the unfamiliar rush of the experience is from the Catholic Church. He feels like he is in the presence "of a great convent, a convent of missions, famous for he scarce knew what, a nursery of young priests, of scattered shade, of straight alleys and chapelbells, that spread its mass in one quarter; he had the sense of names in the air, of ghosts at windows, of signs and tokens" (137). In this moment, Strether uses one set of unfamiliar images or experiences to capture the feeling of another. His knowledge of the Catholic metaphors he employs are "scarce," which is why they can so aptly convey the exciting mystique of the European party.

When Strether arrives at Notre Dame, then, readers must attribute the spiritual state he achieves similarly to a fascination with, rather than a deep appreciation for, Catholicism. Like his experience at his first European party, Strether is saturated with unfamiliar sensory stimuli in the cathedral. This time, however, the stimuli are literally rather than figuratively associated with the Catholic Church. He looks upon the other visitants as "figures of mystery and anxiety" and watches, absorbedly, their behaviors "of penitence, of prostration, of the absolved, relieved state" (7). As Strether expounds upon these observations in his mind, they become imbued with a

significance that he, ironically, does not understand. Watching one woman in prayer, for example, he wonders "if her attitude were some congruous fruit of absolution, of 'indulgence.' He knew but dimly what indulgence, in such a place, might mean; yet he had, as with a soft sweep, a vision of how it might indeed add to the zest of active rites" (8). As the narrator drily observes, "All this was a good deal to have been denoted by a mere lurking figure who was nothing to him" (8). But that is precisely the point: Strether's response to the cathedral is largely a response to his own Romantic visions of it. He draws out and exoticizes select features of his Catholic surroundings, thereby creating the conditions for the emotional release or sanctity that he comes to the cathedral desiring.

Theron Ware and Edna Pontellier undergo more permanent and dramatic spiritual transformations than Strether. Their conversion narratives are structured, however, by similar contrasts between stifling Protestantisms and stimulating Catholicisms. When Theron has a chance to learn about non-Protestant worldviews, he quickly becomes disheartened with the Methodist traditions that had previously defined his personal and professional life. He judges his congregants for adhering to "dogmas and mysteries they knew nothing of" and mocks his former theology for its depressing focus on sin and "hell-fire" (239). In short, he begins to see Protestantism as something that he must escape. Similarly, Edna recalls how, as a child in Kentucky, she would "run . . . away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in the spirit of gloom by my father" (19). In remembering organized Presbyterianism as gloomy and patriarchal, Edna voices one of religious liberals' characteristic concerns, their wariness of religious forms. Edna qualifies afterward that this childhood distaste for religion was just an "unthinking" sign of her youth (19). Yet, as Edna considers her mature religious life, she realizes that it, too, has been unthinking: religion "took a firm hold" of her at one point, and she has been

"just driven along by habit" ever since (19). This attention to the difference between controlling religious forms and self-fashioned religious feelings is one of the first indications of Edna's awakening to herself. She no longer wants to be bound or "held" by established religious codes.

Edna and Theron find their spiritual alternatives in Catholic cultures. Like Strether, they exoticize Catholicism: they judge what is meaningful based on what is new or different to them. Theron's interest in Catholicism first emerges from watching Father Forbes perform a parishioner's last rites. For the dying man, his relatives, and Celia, who is assisting on the scene, the ritual is a sacrament. For Theron, it is a spectacle: it feels "incredible" to him to partake in such a "strange" ceremony; the lavishness and mystery of it all makes his "blood tingle" (43, 41). The display so arouses Theron that the following day he seeks out Father Forbes's and Celia's private company. Considering that he does not really know them personally, readers must conclude that his primary motive is the novelty, perhaps even the transgressiveness, of having Catholic acquaintances. Edna has no such dramatic introduction to Catholic traditions. Yet she, too, has a sense that developing Catholic relationships is exotic or rebellious. As the narrator explains, Edna marries her husband for two reasons: his "absolute devotion" to her, which is flattering, and "the violent opposition of her father and sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic" (21). By marrying a Catholic intentionally to defy her Protestant family, Edna joins them in treating Catholicism as an alien influence in an assumedly Protestant world. The only difference is that, whereas her family perceives Catholicism as a threat, Edna leaps at the chance to experience something new and different.

It is within these exoticized Catholic cultures that Theron and Edna experience their spiritual awakenings. Catholicism's conduciveness to personal religious feelings in the novels thus comes to readers through Protestant eyes: the novels portray Protestant protagonists

responding to select elements of Catholicism that they find newly freeing or exciting. These select elements include, in particular, Catholic stances toward art and sex. In the protagonists' experiences, Catholicism encourages creativity and artistic self-expression, celebrates bodily, including sexual, pleasure, and creates space for queer relationships.[256] It is, to borrow Ellis Hanson's term, a *decadent Catholicism*; its key features are its "aberrant aesthetics and aberrant sexuality."[257] By characterizing Catholic cultures as, above all, decadent, the novels create the conditions for the characters' "modern" religious awakenings. In turn, they make Catholicism a model of personal religion as religious liberals define it. Catholicism becomes a pathway to individual feelings of fullness, awe, or elation.

Through Father Forbes and Celia, Theron actually encounters two possible ways to be Catholic. Celia introduces him to the decadent Catholicism that engenders his personal spiritual awakening. Father Forbes models another possible stance, a secular respect for the Catholic Church as a social formation. Forbes accepts Catholicism as neither a personal nor an institutional religion. Instead he cares about Catholicism solely as an institution. As he reasons, humans will always desire "some kind of religious superstructure" to address their needs for self-validation (242). He believes the Catholic Church will be that lasting superstructure. Once other faiths have worn themselves out with "fruitless wrangling over texts and creeds," he argues, people "will come back to repose pleasantly under the Catholic roof, in that restful house where

[256] This association between the Catholic Church and "aberrant sexuality" of course exists in tension with the Church's long history of homophobia. As Tracy Fessenden and others have argued, this paradoxical straddling of homophobia and queer possibility or homoeroticism is one of the Catholic Church's defining traits. See, for example, Tracy Fessenden, "Chapter Eight: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Catholic Closet," *Culture and Redemption.*
[257] Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 18, 7. Hanson defines decadence as a fin-de-siècle reveling in excess, especially as it leads to failure or decay. Hanson attends in his study to a specific cluster of decadent writers, which he demarcates based on both the content and style of their writing. While I would not classify Chopin and Frederic among Hanson's decadent writers, their depictions of Catholicism resonate with those in his study. For Hanson's decadent writers, the Church was "modern and yet medieval, ascetic and yet sumptuous, spiritual and yet sensual, chaste and yet erotic, homophobic and yet homoerotic, suspicious of aestheticism and yet an elaborate work of art."

things are taken for granted. There the manners are charming, the service excellent, the decoration and upholstery most acceptable to the eye" (242, 243). Forbes's description of the Catholic Church as "restful," "pleasant," and "charming" clarifies the basis of his admiration for it. He praises the Church for requiring so little of its adherents. Rather than asking people to "wrangle" with theological complexities, Catholicism offers them a pleasant atmosphere and a packaged set of "sacred mysteries" that they can either "accept and be saved, or reject and be damned" (242). Within this ready-made, consumable religious culture, Forbes's responsibilities as a priest are mainly symbolic. As Forbes's friend Dr. Ledsmar assesses, what Forbes's parishioners most desire of him is that he serve as a "paternal, ceremonial, authoritative head" (74). Forbes is only too happy to fulfill this role as a figurehead or image of patriarchal authority. The Catholic Church's structure ironically allows him to lead without having to believe. He can be Catholic but not religious (131).

Celia, too, self-identifies as Catholic but not religious (258, 99). However, her understanding of that distinction differs significantly from Forbes's. Forbes embraces the Catholic Church as an institution, but he is personally a religious skeptic. Celia, on the other hand, considers herself "Catholic but not religious" in much the same way that contemporary Americans call themselves spiritual but not religious. As Celia succinctly expresses to Theron, "I am a Catholic. . . . But I should explain that I am a Catholic only in the sense that its symbolism is pleasant to me. . . . The Catholic religion is my jug. I put into it the things I like" (258). Through her metaphor of the jug, Celia clarifies that she practices Catholicism as a personal religion. Unlike the Catholics Forbes pictures, who seek in the Church "a restful house where things are taken for granted," Celia personally selects the "things" that she wants to comprise her Catholicism. As Theron and readers learn, these things include primarily sexual and aesthetic

values. Her personal Catholicism is, in other words, a decadent Catholicism; she values the Catholic tradition as a source of interwoven sexual and artistic freedoms or aberrancies.[258]

Celia practices her decadent Catholicism within and beyond the Catholic masses for which she provides the music. As the narrator relates, Celia's "business about the church" includes not only playing the organ, which she does with a passion, but also directing the choir, arranging the flowers, and caring for the acolytes' and priests' robes (92). In each of these roles, Celia's contribution to the church is both artistic and sensory. She is the keeper of the church's aesthetic dimensions. According to the narrator's report, Celia's other "business about the church" is rumored to be a romantic affair with Father Forbes (92). Whether true or not, the rumor speaks aptly to Celia's fascination with the erotics of Catholicism, including especially the figures of the celibate priest and the Virgin Mary.[259] Her cherished private room, for example, is furnished solely with "divans and huge, soft cushions," marble statues that are "not too strictly clothed," a practice organ, and pictures of the Virgin Mary and Child (91, 191). The room, with its lavish displays of artifice, creativity, and sexuality, is a model of Catholic decadence. When Theron perceives his visit to that room to be a spiritual "conversion" experience, he is responding to the interwoven aesthetics and erotics of Celia's personal Catholicism (204).

Celia herself refers to this unique positionality within Catholic culture as a version of Greek paganism, not Catholicism. When Theron first inquires about her religiosity, for example, she corrects him, "But I'm not religious at all, you know. . . . I'm as Pagan as—anything! Of course there are forms to be observed, and so on; I rather like them than otherwise. I can make them serve very well for my own system, for I am myself, you know, an out-and-out Greek" (99). To be Greek is, in her estimation, to have one's "own system," to observe forms as they

[258] Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism,* 18.
[259] Theron, too, finds Father Forbes, "the celibate priest," a fascinating "enigma." He refers to Forbes's lifestyle as the "great sex mystery" (281).

are personally pleasing. Theron later pushes her on this definition, asking her to clarify what she "really means" by "this Greek idea" (202). Theron's question implies that Greek paganism should refer to a particular set of beliefs of practices. Instead of satisfying that assumption, Celia responds by further dramatizing Greek paganism as a total escape from established systems, the ultimate personal religion. She answers Theron, "Oh . . . lots of things. Absolute freedom from moral bugbears, for one thing. The recognition that beauty is the only thing in life that is worthwhile. The courage to kick out of one's life everything that isn't worth while; and so on" (202). Celia here equates paganism with a self-guided pursuit of beauty and meaning. The nature of these ends, however, she leaves to be intuited by the individual. Celia accordingly makes Greek paganism, like Catholicism, a model of personal religion. It, too, is a "jug" into which she pours "the things she likes" (258). Readers might flag Celia for inconsistently identifying as both a Catholic and a pagan. But, in Celia's formulations, the two traditions reduce to the same common denominator.[260] They are "wholly personal affair[s]," grounded in experiences of beauty and pleasure (99). This alignment of Catholicism and Greek paganism, although seemingly idiosyncratic, manifests similarly in several iterations of late-nineteenth-century psychology, including in the works of William James, Havelock Ellis, and John Robert Seeley.[261] For religious liberals, what Celia calls her "Catholicism" or "paganism" is religion in its most essential state. Theron would agree. Whereas Methodism bores and humiliates him,

[260] I think here of Ellis, who asks, as he frames his psychological theories of religion in *Psychology of Religion*, "How can I make clear to myself this vast and many-shaped religious element of life? . . . Can I . . . reduce it to some common denominator?" (273)

[261] Ellis's *Psychology of Religion*, 235, for example, as it discusses how art can stimulate religious experiences, uses Greek art and Gothic cathedrals as its two examples. Seeley's *Natural Religion*, 73, much like the character Celia, calls Greek paganism a "purer, sweeter worship" than Christianity. Seeley draws his parallels between paganism, humanism, and pantheism. William James devotes two of his *Varieties of Religious Experience* lectures, Lectures IV and V, to defining "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness." He suggests measuring the truth or health of religions by the happiness they afford. Within these lectures, he offers both Catholicism and Greek paganism as more conducive to happiness than Protestantism. He writes of the Greeks, for example, "The Romans and Greeks kept all their sadness and gladness unmingled and entire. . . . Good was good, and bad just bad, for the earlier Greeks. . . . This integrity of the instinctive reactions, this freedom from all moral sophistry and strain, gives a pathetic dignity to ancient pagan feelings." James, 80, 85.

Celia's decadent Catholic culture "awaken[s]" his consciousness and "hallow[s] his mood" (194, 263).

Edna's conversion experience in *The Awakening* unfolds with less dramatic irony than Theron's. Readers are not asked to see through Edna's claims to self-discovery. Yet Edna, too, awakens spiritually under the auspices of a decadent Catholic culture. As in Celia's case, the decadent Catholicism Edna embraces involves no dutiful observance of Catholic doctrines or traditions. The novel indeed explicitly distinguishes between decadent and institutionalized or ritualized Catholicisms: it features as points of contrast an unnamed "lady in black," who wanders solemnly through scenes "telling her beads," and a Catholic mass that Edna attends one morning until she is driven out by feelings of "oppression and drowsiness" (4, 40). The Catholic culture that "awakens" Edna is instead defined by an open regard for creative self-expression and sexual pleasure. Edna basically learns in New Orleans to enjoy art and sex for their own sakes.[262]

When Edna first arrives at her summer home in Grand Isle, an island off the coast of Louisiana, she feels distant from the Creole culture she encounters. As the narrator comments, "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home among the Creoles; never before had she been thrown so intimately among them" (12). In describing Edna as "thrown . . . intimately" among her Creole neighbors, the narrator begins already to circumscribe Edna's sense of how they differ from her. What strikes Edna "most forcibly" about the Creoles, the narrator relates, is their "entire absence of prudery," their "freedom of expression" (12). Edna characterizes the Creoles as, above all, honest or open about their thoughts, needs, and desires—both sexual and otherwise. The "intimacy" Edna feels among the Creoles is accordingly not just a matter of physical proximity or thorough cultural immersion.

[262] Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism,* 18.

She also knows and relates to them intimately, that is, in ways that "prudery" prevented in the Protestant culture in which she was raised.

More about the Catholic undertones of New Orleans's Creole culture emerges through Edna's responses to it, the changes that it prompts in her. As Edna comes to reject her socially imposed roles as wife, mother, daughter, and homemaker, she adopts several new habits of self-expression. For one thing, she begins to say no: she declines to accompany her husband to bed when he expects, for example, and she cancels her calling hours for receiving the social elite (36, 59). She also stops suppressing her "sweeping passions" (59). When her husband upsets her, she removes her wedding ring and throws a glass vase against a tile surface (63). Amidst these general changes in character, Edna also commits herself to two more distinct patterns of new behavior. Analyzed in conjunction, these two aspects of Edna's awakening suggest its grounding in a decadent Catholic culture, a culture defined by its happy reveling in "aberrant aesthetics and aberrant sexuality."[263] First, Edna begins to paint. When Edna tries to explain to her husband that she "feel[s] like painting" but is "not a painter," he wonders if she "were not growing a little unbalanced mentally" (64). He cannot understand, as the narrator explains, that, in painting for its own sake, Edna is "becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (64). Edna's husband tries to discern for what end she is producing her paintings. Always the capitalist, he believes art should be useful or marketable or, at the very least, the grounds for a stable identity. Edna's aesthetic theory is different. She values the creative process as an outlet "to do as she liked and to feel as she liked" (63). Thomas Haddox identifies this claim as a "defiant championing of artifice," a

[263] Ibid., 18.

key value of decadent Catholicism.[264] Edna relishes art as a meaningful indulgence in lavishness or beauty.

Edna's other new habits are sexual—that is, she pursues new bodily pleasures and queer intimacies. Much like her interests in painting, these patterns of desire are characterized as a response to the Catholic-Creole culture in which she newly finds herself. Initially, Edna listens to her Creole acquaintances' views on sex and bodily pleasure with "profound astonishment" (12). As the narrator explains, "Never would Edna Pontellier forget the shock with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her *accouchements,* withholding no intimate detail" (12). But Edna grows accustomed to the Creole's comfort with sex and their bodies and, under their influence, begins to "loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (16). This sexual liberation unfolds particularly through her relationship with her Creole neighbor Adéle Ratignolle. As the two women's friendship develops, Adéle becomes both the model for and the object of Edna's sexual desires. Taken in by Adéle's "excessive physical charm," Edna initially feels for her "the subtle bond we call sympathy, which we might as well call love" (16). The narrator's commentary, "which we might as well call love," foreshadows how easily Edna's "sympathy" blossoms into sexual attraction. When Adéle takes Edna's hand and "stroke[s] it a little, fondly," Edna does not withdraw it as she expects. Instead, she feels "intoxicated with the . . . unaccustomed taste of candor," which "muddle[s] her like wine, or the first breath of freedom" (22). As this moment of queer affinity makes clear, Edna's spiritual awakening has a distinctly sexual register. She is awakening, in part, to her own repressed sexual desires. The novel offers further evidence of this evolution when Edna later kindles relationships with two men. When the more serious of the

[264] Tom Haddox, *Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 83.

two, Robert, tells Edna he has resisted courting her because she is married, "not free," she rejoins, "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (119). As she consciously responds to living among the Creoles, Edna develops an intertwined sense of self-possession and sexual freedom. Never too far from thoughts of her Protestant roots, she embraces the eroticism she takes to define the Creole's Catholic culture.

The Catholic cultures that enable Edna's, Theron's, and Strether's personal religious experiences are thus alternately characterized as artistic, erotic, expansive, solitary, peaceful, and exotic—basically, anything but structured and communal. In selecting these traits, the novels turn Catholicism, with its amorphous outsider status in the Protestant American consciousness, into a canvas for working through the ideals of religious liberalism. Their Catholicisms are not, for that reason, skewed, a critique that would suggest literary realism should serve a mimetic function. To be sure, the novels never suggest that their goal is a realistic documenting of the historical workings of the Catholic Church. Rather, they rather envision, through Catholicism, the kind of personally stimulating religion they associate with modernity. A robust literary-religious history of the turn of the twentieth century requires that we ask these questions about why particular novels care about Catholicism, and that we use that awareness to probe how heterodox religious traditions intersect.

The next section of this chapter begins to undertake this work. The section contrasts the personal, decadent Catholicisms in Chopin's, Frederic's, and James's novels with the Social Gospel-inspired Protestantism in Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps.* My interest lies particularly in the collective, institutionally guided religious experiences in Sheldon's novel. These shared experiences spur the characters to social and political action and, in the same stroke, exemplify the dimensions of turn-of-the-century American religiosity that exceeded psychology's scope.

My focus on a Protestant bestseller emerges, moreover, from an interest in the political power that Protestantism has historically held because of its size. Sheldon could urge Protestant readers to use their faiths to enact social change because there were enough of them to make it plausible. A literary-religious history that accounts for the social and communal aspects of U.S. religions is one that can also confront these disparities in faiths' powers of public expression.

The Politics of What Jesus Would Do

At the end of Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps,* the protagonist Reverend Henry Maxwell opens a sermon to a large Chicago congregation with a series of questions:

> Is it true that the church of today, the church that is called after Christ's own name, would refuse to follow Him at the expense of suffering, of physical loss, of temporary gain? The statement was made . . . last week by a leader of the workingmen that it was hopeless to look to the church for any reform or redemption of society. On what was that statement based? Plainly on the assumption that the church contains for the most part men and women who think more 'of their own easy and luxury' than of the sufferings and needs and sins of humanity. How far is that true? Are the Christians of America ready to have their discipleship tested? (145)

Henry's theme in this closing sermon is basically the same one that occupies all of his many sermons throughout the novel. It is also the theme of the novel. What makes this articulation unique is its concern with the "Christians of America," conveyed in the third-person. By the next paragraph, Henry has changed to addressing his audience directly: "you" must take such and such action. In this moment, however, he asks the characters—and with them the readers— to

turn their attention outward from the novel world. The focalization hails Christian readers and invites them to ask in turn, "Well, are we?"[265]

Sheldon's novel sold millions of copies in the years after its publication, so if the Christians of America were not ready to have their discipleship tested, a good number were at least ready to consider the idea.[266] The period out which Sheldon's novel arose was one of seismic change for Protestantism; some historians refer to it as the Third Great Awakening.[267] As George Marsden explains, in the late-nineteenth century, a long-standing rift between those Protestants who focused on personal salvation and those concerned with "social sins" like racism and economic inequality became markedly more pronounced.[268] Both parties saw themselves responding to "crises" of the modern age. They just understood those crises differently. [269] The former group, an early prototype of what we now call conservative Protestantism or fundamentalism, doubled down on the individuals' needs to repent from sin and seek eternal life. The latter turned its attention instead to "social crises," particularly the economic inequalities resulting from the Industrial Revolution and, in some cases, racial inequalities following the failures of Reconstruction. [270] It is from this latter impulse that the Social Gospel movement emerged. Its aim was nothing less than to rebuild Western society according to God's will, as

[265] At one other point in the novel, the narrator addresses readers directly as "Christian America!" (120)
[266] Miller, *Following In His Steps,* 85.
[267] See, for example, William McLoughlin, "Chapter 5: The Third Great Awakening, 1890–1920," *Revivals, Awakening, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
[268] Martin Marty describes this as the start of a two-party system in Protestantism, a "Private Protestantism," which coopted the term "evangelical" that had previously described U.S. Protestants generally, and a "Public Protestantism" that was concerned with the social order and people's "social destinies." Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 179.
[269] The focus on social sin versus personal salvation was only one of many differences between the parties. They also differed notably, for example, in their interpretations of scripture (biblical literalism versus higher criticism) and their views on Darwinian evolution (denial versus acceptance). William Martin, *With God on Our Side,* 6.
[270] Donald Gorrell provides a thorough account of how the notion of a "social crisis" shaped the Social Gospel movement in "The Church and Its Social Crisis," *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era 1900-1920* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988).

conveyed through Jesus's historical example.[271] Of course, when Social Gospelers said "God's will," what many really meant was "Protestant doctrine," as the movement's vehement anti-Catholic strain perhaps most clearly evinces.[272] This uncritical universalizing of Protestantism, however, was part of what allowed for Social Gospelers' characteristic optimism about their social and political potential. As prominent Social Gospel (and anti-Catholic) theologian Walter Rauschenbusch expressed in his popular *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), "Under the warm breath of religious faith, all social institutions become plastic. The religious spirit moves mountains and tramples on impossibilities."[273]

The image of a "religious spirit" moving believers to social action drives *In His Step*'s episodic plot. Characters convene in their church each Sunday and then, moved by the Holy Spirit, go forth to reform all areas of their lives— their business models, career ambitions, financial investments, and political interests—as they believe Jesus would. The first part of that two-step process, the motion of the spirit, arouses in characters many of the emotions that psychologists of religion associate with religious experience. Much like the characters in Chopin's, James's, and Frederic's novels, Sheldon's churchgoers feel freed, empowered, illuminated, or awakened as they resolve to reorient their lives. When Henry Maxwell first presents his challenge to his congregation, for example, the thought of his life's "great upheaval" moves him "with a depth of feeling he could not measure" (14). Similarly, after a tent-revival, the narrator describes of one congregant Rachel, "There was one great, overmastering feeling in her. . . . The swift, powerful, awesome presence of the Holy Spirit had affected her as never in all

[271] Interest in the historical Jesus was high among liberal Protestants of the era. Books like Henry Beecher's *The Life of Jesus Christ* fueled that interest. Gregory Jackson, "'What Would Jesus Do?': Practical Christianity, the Social Gospel Realism, and the Homiletic Novel," *PMLA*, 121, 3 (2006), 641–661, 646.
[272] Cushing Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 231.
[273] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), xii.

her life before" (55). In both instances, characters undergo spiritual transformations that the novel locates in inarticulable religious feelings.

Yet there is a fundamental difference between their religious experiences and the secular-spiritualities featured in psychological realist novels. When Edna Pontellier, Lambert Strether, and Theron Ware have their secular-spiritual awakenings, the experiences arise within themselves, affect themselves, and direct their attention inward toward themselves. The strongest example of these experiences is Theron Ware's "conversion" (204). As Theron supposedly becomes more enlightened, he alienates himself from his wife, who he now views as "unillumined"; his congregation, whose beliefs he treats as a "spectacle"; and his new Catholic acquaintances, who he imagines he emulates (104, 148). This self-inflicted alienation is not something Edna and Strether also experience. Yet their secular-spiritualities, too, are essentially isolated and isolating. For Strether, the journey to Notre Dame is ironically a "pilgrimage" made "by himself," a "private concession" that he hopes remains "unnoticed" (5, 6). He perceives the other visitants he observes to be similarly alone and self-absorbed: his acquaintance Madame de Vionnet, for example, sits "strangely fixed," as if "on her own ground," having "lost herself" yet showing a "discernible faith in herself" (7, 9, 8). Strether's privatizing, in his mind, of church rituals like pilgrimages and prayers speaks to the directionality of his secular-spiritual feelings. The cathedral, rather than a place of gathering or communion, is meaningful to him as a retreat from sociality. Edna's spiritual journey in *The Awakening* is similarly motivated. Edna realizes one day: "I would give up my life for my children; but I wouldn't give up myself" (53). The awakening moves her to start doing as she pleases, including abandoning her expected calling hours, moving into her own house, pursuing extramarital affairs, and eventually committing suicide (53, 64). These decisions are varied manifestations of the same desire: to "wander for a

spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose [her soul] in the mazes of inward contemplation" (16). Her awakening is, above all, deeply personal. Her transformation distances her from others who, because of the insularity of human minds, cannot possibly feel what she is undergoing.[274]

In contrast, religious experiences in *In His Steps* are externally initiated, communally shared, and politically consequential. Their community-building potential begins with their common source. The secular-spiritual experiences in Chopin's, Frederic's, and James's novels are spontaneous emotional reactions to stimuli ranging from music to nature to sexual titillation. Sheldon's characters, on the other hand, consistently attribute their religious feelings to the same independent, doctrinally authenticated force: the Holy Spirit. "There was a distinct presence of the Spirit felt by them all," the narrator chronicles as Henry presents his test of discipleship to his congregation. "As the prayer went on, this presence grew in power. They all felt it. The room was filled with it as plainly as if it had been visible" (14). Later in the novel, this Spirit proves capable of spreading across even wider audiences. When Edward, a bishop from Chicago, prays over two thieves, the narrator describes, "What force of the Holy Spirit swept over his . . . life, nothing but the eternal records of the recording angel can ever disclose. But the same supernatural Presence that smote Paul on the road to Damascus, and poured through Henry Maxwell's church . . . now manifested Himself in this foul corner of the mighty city" (127). This influence expands in subsequent scenes until eventually "the Holy Spirit move[s] over the great, selfish, pleasure-loving, sin-stained city" itself (137). By pointing to the Holy Spirit as a universal generator of spiritual experiences, the novel unifies characters in their religiosities: they can be awakened together when the Holy Spirit descends upon them. Rather than spirituality emerging from an individual's subjective feelings, *In His Steps* shows an identifiable

[274] As William James writes in *The Principles of Psychology* (London: Macmillan, 1901; first published 1890), "No thought even comes into direct *sight* of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. . . . Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law" (226).

Spirit moving congregations, cities, and nations all at once. The characters' spiritual experiences, interpreted according to shared Protestant doctrines, draw them together rather than setting them apart.

And, once drawn together, the characters act together. As the narrator recounts after one of Henry Maxwell's congregational meetings, "But more than any other feeling at this meeting rose the tide of fellowship for one another. Maxwell watched it, trembling for its climax which he knew was not yet reached. When it was, where would it lead them? . . . Who could measure their influence at the end of the year?" (72). Henry's link between "fellowship" and "influence" shows his awareness of the political power lying latent in American Protestants' numbers. In direct keeping with the Social Gospel movement, Henry then goes on to harness this power to reform the public sphere. In Rauschenbusch's manifesto for the Social Gospel movement, he calls upon Christians "singly and collectively to put their hands to the plow and not look back until public morality shall be at least as much Christianized as private morality."[275] This concern for "public morality," paired in Rauschenbusch's work with concepts like "social sin" and "social hope," suggests a scale for measuring religiosity that puts the community or society ahead of the individual.[276] The same scale holds true in *In His Steps*. Henry Maxwell's final vision in the novel includes the "church of Jesus in America open[ing] its heart to the moving of the Spirit and ris[ing] to the sacrifice of its ease and self-satisfaction in the name of Jesus" (150). Religious forms and institutions are not here derivative of individuals' "true" religious feelings. Rather the church as a collective unit is deemed capable of having faith and following Jesus in its

[275] Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 343.
[276] Ibid., 343, 349. This was, of course, an ironic calculation for Rauschenbusch to make, considering his outspoken anti-Catholicism. Molly Oshatz argues in *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Literal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) that this idea of "social sin" first emerged during the antebellum era in arguments against slavery. (See particularly "Chapter Four: Social Sin.") As Cushing Strout argues in *The New Heavens and New Earth*, 231, Social Gospelers then resurrected the term in their turn-of-the-century context.

own right. For Sheldon, institutions catalyze and organize the social actions that center religious lives.

When contemporary literary histories treat literary realism as the mainspring of late-nineteenth-century literary culture, they tend to underrepresent this "practical Christianity" as a conscious rendering of a so-called modern religion.[277] Psychological realists' secular-spiritualities offer such an appealing finale to narratives that trace the American novel's secularization across the latter half of the nineteenth century. Yet these secular-spiritualities represent only a fraction of the ways that turn-of-the-century Americans, including Social Gospelers, imagined religion's place in their self-understood modern age. As Jackson notes, literary realism and the homiletic novel tradition into which *In His Steps* fits "traveled on parallel tracks" in the late nineteenth century, having both developed from older Protestant forms.[278] The crucial difference is that realism (and naturalism) "disengaged the mechanism of activism so crucial to the tradition of homiletic fiction."[279] In other words, if *In His Steps* and other homiletic novels seem didactic, they should: they were pedagogical genres, built upon long-standing Protestant sermon conventions and a new emphasis in late-nineteenth-century liberal congregations on listeners' "participatory engagement."[280] *In His Steps* models for readers the kind of active Protestant influence they could have in the public sphere, both through characters' examples within the text and its own example as popular religious fiction. Much like the psychological realists, Sheldon hierarchizes and temporalizes varieties of religious experiences,

[277] The term "practical Christianity," which Gregory Jackson invokes in his analysis of *In His Steps* and what he calls "homiletic realism," also circulated in the late nineteenth century. See, for example, author Edward Everett Hale's *How They Lived in Hampton: A Study of Practical Christianity Applied in the Manufacture of Woolens* (Boston: Smith, 1888). Edward Hale was the author of another popular Social Gospel novel, *If Jesus Came to Boston* (1894).
[278] Jackson defines homiletic novels as those that merge fictive settings with readers' lives. Jackson, "'What Would Jesus Do?'" 643, 642.
[279] Ibid., 643.
[280] Ibid., 650.

designating some responses as befitting modernity and others as outmoded, stifling, or hollow. But, in contrast to the realists, he associates "modern" religiosity with civic participation. In *In His Steps,* modernity creates social ills that a revitalized Protestant religion can and should fix.

Throughout the novel, three types of genuine Christian action— things it suggests Jesus definitely would do— emerge. Most of the characters learn to live out their Protestant faiths by directly giving their time and money to oppressed populations. At the start of the novel, Henry Maxwell's well-to-do congregation has little contact with or interest in what they call "the public" or "the people" of their community (52, 122). Their discomfort with the working class would likely have resonated with late-century, white Protestant readers: since mainline white American Protestant churches had traditionally backed laissez faire capitalism via a gospel of work, their congregations tended to draw from the middle- and upper-classes.[281] As the characters measure their Christian lives against what they understand to be Jesus's example, however, they realize they should reach out to the "dirty, drunken, impure, besotted mass of humanity" around them (44). The realization proves as socially motivating in effect as it is classist and patronizing in tone. It moves the characters to build settlement houses for women and girls, initiate tent revivals, and find work for the unemployed. Readers observe as the characters together "revolutionize many of the regular, customary habits of the town," creating a stir both in Raymond and "throughout the country" (56). The novel models how small Christian actions, when coordinated, can have the momentum to create material changes in society.

In addition to these direct means of aiding the poor and socially disadvantaged, *In His Steps* offers Protestants two recommendations for more strategically increasing Christianity's public influence. The first is voting. Characters in the novel begin questioning their political stances almost as soon as they accept Henry's challenge to discipleship. Edward Norman, the

[281] Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth,* 227.

editor of a local newspaper, perhaps best explains the new mindset as he outlines some changes in his editorial policies:

> The first question asked in this office about any political question will not be, 'Is it in the interests of our party?' or 'Is it according to the principles laid down by our party in its platform?' but the question first asked will be, 'Is this measure in accordance with the spirit and teachings of Jesus as the author of the greatest standard of life known to men?' (45)

What Norman proffers readers of his paper, and accordingly readers of the novel, is a vision of politics as foremost a matter of faith. He teaches that votes are opportunities to express God's will. He also implies, in the process, that there can be only one Christian way to vote, that Christians can in fact unify behind God's ascertainable political opinions. The logic of this assumption importantly diverges from the novel's stance on other aspects of Christian living. Generally, the novel's Christian characters are left to determine freely through prayer, reflection, and Scripture-reading what they believe Jesus would do in their individual situations—"not always an easy question to answer," as one member expresses (27). Yet, for all their uncertainties and relativism about how Jesus would spend money or run businesses, the characters seem to have no questions about how Jesus would vote. To the contrary, they value the ballot precisely to the extent that they can seize it as a unified Christian "force" (59). When Henry undertakes his new discipleship, he realizes for the first time the political power that "the Christian people" might have if they "all act together," if they "move as one man against the traffic" (45). With that, he and the president of a local college decide to plan a campaign for their local primaries, one that "will mean something because it is organized righteousness" (60). As

their lofty phrasing suggests, the men understand their work as Christians to be a matter of organizing: they must bring Christians together to give meaning to their personal religiosities.

The particular stance they see Christians called to defend within the novel is the temperance movement. While Sheldon was writing, the temperance movement was enjoying its second of three notable runs in the U.S. The first arose amidst the reform spirit of the antebellum era. The third would culminate in the official legislating of Prohibition in 1920.[282] The second, at the turn of the century, grew the movement's legislative goals and political ambitions.[283] *In His Steps* responds by making saloon licensing the linchpin of its Christian characters' political agenda. The novel suggests fighting the saloons in Raymond is not only the characters' most important *political* duty but also their paramount duty as Christians generally. Thus Henry poses to his congregation during a sermon:

> The regular election of city officers was near at hand. The question of license would be an issue in the election. . . . Was not the most Christian thing they could do to act as citizens in the matter, fight the saloon at the polls, elect good men to the city offices, and clean the municipality? How much had prayers helped to make Raymond better while votes and actions had really been on the side of the enemies of Jesus? (57)

Henry's view of the "most Christian thing"—"to act as citizens"— strikingly contrasts with early psychologists' theories of religious essences. At the same time that psychologists of religion were coming to understand individuals' religious feelings, Social Gospelers were rallying Protestant Christians to unify and assert their faith in the public sphere. *In His Steps* functions to guide Protestant readers toward this collective action. It offers them models like the town of Raymond, whose saloons will only close if "the Christian forces act as a unit against [them]"

[282] Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility*, 7.
[283] Ibid. Gorrell reminds us that the temperance movement was bigger than the Social Gospel movement—"it didn't much need their help"—despite that most Social Gospelers supported it.

(63). It also rhetorically positions readers to interpret political contests typologically, as sites of cosmological battles between good and evil. When the characters are preparing to vote against their town's saloon licenses, for example, the narrator describes, "The Holy Spirit was battling with all His supernatural strength against the saloon devil which had so long held a jealous grasp on its slaves" (62). The language creates space for the characters and readers to be fighting in the same epic battle. The novel teaches Christians that, by voting together, they can collectively defend God's stronghold in the world.

The other more specialized action that the novel identifies with a true or socially active religiosity is religious writing and reading. In short, the novel teaches readers to read more texts similar to itself. It begins its case for religious reading and writing by critiquing two examples of the opposite. The first is the novel-writing of a young congregant named Jaspar. Like many other characters, Jaspar pledges to follow in Jesus's steps when Henry proposes the idea. However, while the other Christian characters make sacrifices and grow in their faiths, Jasper's desire for money and fame outweighs his commitment to the church, and he goes ahead with a novel-in-progress that has "no purpose but to amuse" and that Jesus "would never write" (88). The consequences of Jaspar's writing habits are severe. When Henry envisions the future, he foresees that Jasper, "who had denied his Master," will fall into "a cold, cynical, formal life, writing novels that were social successes, but each one with a sting in it, a reminder of his denial, the bitter remorse" (149). The choice to write secular fiction is equated here with nothing less than denying Christ. Sheldon, himself the author of one to two religious books a year for most of his career, has no patience for Christian writers who forgo their responsibilities as religious teachers and instead just capitalize on the tastes of secular reading audiences.[284]

[284] Miller, *Following In His Steps,* 34.

Edward Norman, the editor-in-chief of a daily newspaper in Raymond *The News*, provides the counterpoint to Jasper's selfishness. Edward begins Henry's test of discipleship similarly focused on profits and popularity. Upon accepting the challenge, however, he vows "not to do a thing in connection with the paper for a whole year that . . . Jesus would not do" (17). On this, he follows through: within weeks, he has cut all the paper's sensational stories, stopped selling ads to liquor and tobacco companies, and ceased running a paper on Sunday. At first, the paper loses readers, and, for a while, Edward has to appeal to the congregation to support it financially. Yet even then, the novel instructs, the paper does Jesus's bidding. The narrator describes how the Christianized paper "excite[s]" subscribers and "disturb[s] the usual business custom of Raymond" (45, 25). Like the characters' anti-saloon campaign, the newspaper holds power within the town even when it is not "successful." It connects the Christian characters into a reading public. Moreover, according to Henry's vision, the paper's initial stir does eventually translate into financial success. He relates that *The News* "in time came to be recognized as one of the real factors of the nation to mold its principles and actually shape its policies, a daily illustration of the might of a Christian press" (18).

Within four years of writing *In His Steps,* Sheldon had a chance to test the validity of Henry's vision in his own context. Sheldon first became committed to the idea of a daily Christian newspaper after conducting a sociological study of Topeka's newspapers in 1890.[285] His era had many religious periodicals— Timothy Miller describes it as the "heyday of religious

[285] Ibid., 27, 25. The methods of Sheldon's study were direct experience and observation: he worked alongside employees of the *Topeka Daily Capital* for a week as an unpaid reporter. (This was actually one of eight populations among whom he chose to spend a week. The others were streetcar operators, college students, blacks, railroad workers, lawyers, physicians, and businessmen.) Sheldon concluded, after his week at the newspaper, that the city needed a "positively Christian" daily newspaper, one "manned by Christian men throughout." Charles Sheldon, "A Newspaper Man for a Week," *The First Christian Daily Paper and Other Sketches* (New York: Street and Smith, 1900), 30–31.

journalism"—but only a few that were published daily.[286] In 1900, the editor of the secular daily *The Topeka Capital* invited Sheldon to guest edit the paper for a week according to his Christian principles.[287] The project was promoted extensively on a national scale, and despite harsh criticism from some secular news sources—editors of other papers derisively called Sheldon's editing stint "holy week"—the paper's run was phenomenally successful: *The Capital* had to enlist presses from Chicago, New York City, and London to keep up with the printing demands, and the Topeka post office hired extra clerks to handle all the incoming orders.[288] As he had done with *In His Steps* a few years earlier, Sheldon here brought into being the Christian reading public that he envisioned and encouraged within many of his texts. As the texts circulated, they gathered or organized Christians for social action.

Reading and writing matter in Sheldon's novel, then, for the same reasons that campaigning and voting matter: they help turn individuals' religious feelings into collective public actions. As Gregory Jackson argues, homiletic novels like *In His Steps* "were to a nation of like-minded Christians what the sermon had been to smaller, regional communities."[289] They "performed a kind of communal collective bargaining," helping to frame on broadest social and moral terms what was "acceptable, negotiable, or intolerable" by American Christian standards.[290] *In His Steps* not only participates in this process but also takes the process—the unifying of Christians into a politically and socially viable force—as its subject. The Protestant characters are moved by the Spirit but also by one another: their communities channel their

[286] Ibid., 106. Several other daily Christian newspapers in places like New York and Philadelphia had failed. The only long-term successful one was in Montreal.
[287] Ibid., 111. Sheldon first tried out his Christian editing skills as a single-issue guest editor for a Topeka daily newspaper in 1895, a year before publishing *In His Steps*.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Jackson, "'What Would Jesus Do?'" 642.
[290] Ibid.

religious feelings to make changes in society. Ultimately, then, their votes, texts, time, and money translate into social and political power.

Recognizing this power as such is one of the reasons for incorporating popular Protestant novels like Sheldon's into American literary history. Writing on the brink of the Progressive Era, Sheldon had reason to believe Social Gospelers might actually make strides toward accomplishing their social and political goals in the early twentieth century. The politics of the Progressive Era indeed shared much of Social Gospelers' focus on reform, and some leading progressives like Woodrow Wilson actively identified with the Social Gospel movement.[291] Certainly liberal Protestants were not singlehandedly responsible for the early twentieth-century political climate. But they did contribute to it—so subtly and pervasively, as historically has been Protestantism's way, that it is difficult to determine exactly to what extent. In Cushing Stout's work on the early twentieth century, he writes that it is "profoundly puzzling" to try to distinguish between the era's religious and secular ideas for reform.[292] History reminds us that this kind of unmarked influence belonged to white American Protestantism at the expense of other religions vying for rights and recognition as well. When literary histories prioritize psychological realists' forays into the boundaries of intensely personal religions, they miss chronicling the subtle exclusionary powers that white Protestants exerted over other faiths in the turn-of-the-century U.S. public sphere.

[291] Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth,* 244. Although he began as more of a conservative or evangelical Protestant, Wilson espoused by the early twentieth century that "Christianity was just as much intended to save society as to save the individual."
[292] Ibid., 227.

CHAPTER FOUR: ETHIOPIANIST NOVELS AND THEIR NONSECULAR AFRICAN AMERICAN FUTURITIES

In the preceding three chapters, I analyzed how late-nineteenth-century white New England liberal Protestants used the novel to adapt their faiths to changing social, intellectual, and psychological circumstances. These changes sustained at once the personal meaningfulness and ideological power of white liberal Protestant traditions. They furnished believers, including women who were and are often left out of mainline church and literary histories, with coherent, hybridized religious worldviews befitting a secular age. They also, in the process, often reinforced white liberal Protestants' privilege over nonwhite and non-Protestant demographics. To study the novels of these traditions, then—traditions that all belong more or less to the Protestant center of American literary-religious history— is to acknowledge an ongoing tension surrounding dominant Western religions' ends. My theory of the novel and late-century U.S. literary history show the innovations, formal and theological, by which late-century Protestantism's power endured, in the dual sense of its depth or seriousness as a worldview and its oppressive place of privilege in the U.S. public sphere.

This chapter charts a different but complementary course. Here I turn from the Protestant center of U.S. literary-religious history to a faith usually pushed far to its margins: Ethiopianism, a tradition that thrived among a select subset of African Americans (and other African and Afro-diasporic peoples) from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries.[293] Ethiopianists

[293] Joanna Brooks traces the beginnings of Ethiopianism in the U.S. to eighteenth-century freemasonry. Joanna Brooks, "Prince Hall, Freemasonry, and Genealogy," *African American Review*, 34, 2 (2000), 197–216. By the early twentieth century, Ethiopianism as such was in decline, having evolved into Black Nationalist movements like Garveyism and separatist religious traditions like Rastafarianism. As Barry Chevannes clarifies, Ethiopianism in the U.S. and Caribbean is distinct from southern African Ethiopianism, a secessionist church movement that began in 1893. Although the Ethiopian Church of southern Africa would eventually become an independent movement, it initially affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the U.S., gaining important momentum when

found their initiating premise in Psalms 68:31, "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God," a verse they interpreted metonymically as a commentary on Africa's past and a promise for its future.[294] Working from a cyclical model of history, Ethiopianists celebrated the glories of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia and anticipated the day when the racist, materialistic West would collapse and Africa would be restored to greatness. In these narratives, Africa's initial fall from glory and subsequent history of being oppressed had resulted from the continent's idolatry: as with the children of Israel, God was punishing Africa for its spiritual waywardness. Africans' centuries of suffering, therefore, were not meaningless. They were rather a form of purification that would prepare Africans or, frequently in the U.S. tradition, African Americans, to resume their roles as the leaders of civilization.

Although present in the U.S. since the late eighteenth century, Ethiopianism took on new significance in what Charles Chesnutt called the postbellum, pre-Harlem era. Edward Blyden, writer, editor, emigrant from the West Indies to Liberia, and strong proponent of colonization or black immigration to Africa, personally aided the movement by helping to intellectualize it. He bolstered his biblical history of Africa with archaeological, linguistic, and ethnographic evidence. The movement swelled again after Ethiopia unexpectedly defeated an invading Italian army in 1896. When Ethiopia's emperor Menelik II declared, "Ethiopia has never been conquered and she never shall be. . . . Ethiopia will stretch out her hands only to God," the message resonated throughout the African diaspora.[295] By the turn of the century, Ethiopianism

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U.S. Bishop Henry Turner came to visit. Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 33.

[294] Ethiopianists' version of Psalms 68:31 comes from the King James Bible.

[295] Qtd. in Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1993), 554. This pride was revitalized, not new. Christian peoples of African descent had long taken special interest in Ethiopia because of its early conversion to Christianity. Ethiopia accepted Christianity as a state religion in the fourth century. Charles Henry Rowell, "Older than the Flow of Human Blood in Human Veins: The Editor's Note," *Callaloo,* 33, 1 (2010), 1–7, 1.

circulated widely in U.S. speeches, sermons, poems, histories, dramas, textbooks, sculptures, newspaper editorials, and drawings.[296]

That popularity has not been matched by an equivalent level of attention in American or African American literary histories. From the 1970s to the early 2000s, Ethiopianism garnered only intermittent critical attention, including notably in St. Clair Drake's and Wilson Jeremiah Moses's work in the 1970s and '80s, Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations* (1993), and John Gruesser's *Black on Black* (2000).[297] Within the past ten years, these interests have coalesced into a more sustained critical conversation, a shift made possible by *Callaloo*'s 2010 special issue on Ethiopia and contributors like Nadia Nurhussein's and Ivy Wilson's subsequent work. Still, Ethiopianism remains the specialty of a rather compact subfield, with little sustained attention, or often even name recognition, outside of it. Like many African American religious traditions in the U.S. that do not register within the primarily Methodist and Baptist Black Church, broadly conceived, Ethiopianism has largely slipped through the cracks of American literary-religious history.

I argue that this seeming oversight is, more accurately, a product of literary study's disproportionate attention to religion as an ideological construct, and not also a source of fullness or a probe to progressive social or political action. As early as the 1920s, some historians began describing Ethiopianists' prophetic worldview as divorced from, even a hindrance to, the

[296] Some of these texts accrued evidence for complicated Ethiopianist narratives. Others evoked Ethiopianism only via brief allusions or abstract images. Artist Meta V.W. Fuller's sculpture "Ethiopia Awakening" (1914) for example, depicts a bronze woman in ancient Egyptian burial garments returning to life. To give a sense of the movement's scope, the nationally-circulating African American weekly *The Christian Recorder* published twenty-seven articles with Ethiopianist references between 1890 and 1902. After 1902, the references steeply decline: I found no additional allusions to Psalms 68:31 in the magazine between 1902 and 1910.

[297] Sundquist discusses Ethiopianism in a reading of W. E. B. Du Bois. John Cullen Gruesser's *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 1, opens with the evocative claim that all African American depictions of Africa, 1902–1982, either invoke or react against Ethiopianism.

movement's revolutionary potential.[298] Such critics saw Ethiopianists' faith in God's redeeming power as an obstacle to present political action, a form of capitulation to white Christianization narratives long deployed to justify slavery and racial oppression. Some of the same suspicions linger today. When literary historians describe Ethiopianism's lasting significance, it is often less for *doing* political work than as a stepping stone to political work, whether to anti-Fascist rhetoric in the age of Mussolini or to twentieth-century movements like Black Nationalism. In these narratives, Ethiopianism's biblical elements, its "reliance on religious mysticism rather than history, economic analysis, and scientific data," is what its modern successors outgrew.[299] The later movements uncoupled their visions of African and African American futurity from an antiquated faith in divine favors. They forged stronger pan-African alliances and gained more freedom from Western racial stereotypes by distancing themselves from Ethiopianism's blend of "mysticism, ahistoricism, monumentalism, and African American exceptionalism."[300]

This chapter charts a different course. It does not assume that religious mysticism was antithetical to Ethiopianism's liberatory intentions, nor that the movement was ahistorical in its reliance on biblical stories and nonlinear spiritual temporalities. Such readings depend upon equating political "progress" with secularization—the thesis that, in modern society, religion's role does, and more importantly should, decline in political life. As theorists of the secular like Tracy Fessenden and Vincent Pecora have argued, this kind of separation between religion and politics in contemporary scholarship distances academia from a public sphere in which the two realms are intimately connected. It leaves the political power, the "no-questions-asked status," of dominant religious traditions like conservative Christianity unchecked and, at the same time, disregards how African Americans and other marginalized demographics have used faith to

[298] Gruesser, *Black on Black,* 12.
[299] Ibid., 17.
[300] Ibid., 14.

confront oppressive social structures.[301] Following Vincent Lloyd, this chapter contends that "rhetorics of freedom" surrounding race and religion in the United States belie "realities of management," realities that make certain arguments, such as theological cries of racial injustice, illegible.[302] For these reasons, Ethiopianism demands attention as a tradition that is political *because* it is mystical and historiographically significant *because* it resists Western secular standards of what constitutes scholarly evidence. Rather than an obstacle to political consciousness, I argue that Ethiopianism represents one type of political consciousness, a "prophetic consciousness," as theologian Walter Brueggemann might suggest, with exceptional power to energize individuals and communities in the face of an oppressive social order. At a glance, Ethiopianism's cyclical temporalities and biblical prophecies are a far cry from the keen social commentaries of thinkers like Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Its cosmological visions can seem abstracted from day-to-day violences, and, as this chapter will acknowledge, in some cases, they were. But visions of alternative social realities, ordained by God, were also the foundation of Ethiopianists' political or prophetic "counterconsciousness," empowering them to speculate an earthly future beyond the unjust present.[303] Embroiled in histories of violence and exclusion, Ethiopianists mobilized biblical narratives to interpret experiences of suffering on their own terms, that is, within trajectories pointing toward pan-African unity and world leadership.[304] These faithful acts of memory in turn galvanized believers to claim identities and establish communities counter to dominant social

[301] Tracy Fessenden, "'The Secular' as Opposed to What?" *New Literary History,* 38, 4 (2007), 631–36, 635.
[302] Vincent W. Lloyd, "Introduction: Managing Race, Managing Religion," *Race and Secularism in America,* ed. Jonathan S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 7.
[303] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* revised edition (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001; first published 1978), 21.
[304] Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 8.

structures. To downplay Ethiopianism's religious historiography is to overlook why the movement mattered, personally and politically, at the turn-of-the-century moment.

I build my case for the counterconsciousness-building potential of Ethiopianism's cyclical histories by analyzing one particular subset of the Ethiopianist archive, turn-of-the-century Ethiopianist fiction. Despite the ubiquity of nonfictional Ethiopianist texts, there are only four known turn-of-the-century novels: Sutton E. Griggs's *Unfettered* (1902) and *The Hindered Hand* (1905), John E. Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* (serialized in *McGirt's Magazine* from 1907–09), and Pauline E. Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (serialized in the *Colored American Magazine* from 1902–03).[305] This scarcity, combined with the convolutedness of the four extant novels' plots, suggests just how difficult it may have been to turn Ethiopianism into a novel plot, to imagine biblical prophecies being fulfilled for individuals in secular time. Precisely in taking up that struggle of representation, though, the novels offer fruitful grounds for studying the political consequences of Ethiopianist thought. They depict characters seeking reasons for and an end to lived experiences of injustice. In the characters' turn-of-the-century contexts, any hopeful visions of the past and future vie against painful experiences in the present. This tension between idealism and empiricism plays out differently across the novels: two end hopefully, and two do not. For readers trained in a hermeneutics of suspicion, however, the endings all invite the same critique: of a faith so removed from reality that it actually impedes, not effects, social change.

It is true that the characters' visions of the future do not derive from their present experiences. Yet to call Ethiopianism abstracted from reality is to miss that its politicizing power

[305] My archive includes Ethiopianist novels written in the United States between 1890 and 1910. I do not include novels by African writers, such as J.E. Casely Hayford's well-known *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), or ones written in the U.S. after 1910, such as Charles Henry Holmes's *Ethiopia, the Land of Promise* (1917). According to Gruesser's *Black on Black*, 3, Martin Delany's *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859) was the only African American novel before 1900 to depict Ethiopia or Africa at all. Delany's historical text *Principles of Ethnology: The Origins of the Races with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization* (1879) would later become foundational to Ethiopianism. It was one of the source texts for Hopkins's novel.

lies precisely in its imaginative remove from the standing social order. Confronting the violences and exclusions of their turn-of-the-century present, the characters find grounds for speculating alternative futures elsewhere—namely, in biblical histories, taken on faith. The novels may show Ethiopianism's radical religious historiography, its sense of the future as a return to the biblical past, departing from characters' lived experiences. But they also show that departure empowering characters to identify oppressive social structures and develop countercommunities rooted in faith and collective memory. The characters' biblical histories and spiritual visions are, in this sense, the novels' most radical intervention in turn-of-the-century politics: they invert, to varying extents, nineteenth-century racial hierarchies and document patterns of African American suffering, strength, violence, and resilience that Western narratives tend to deny or erase. By acknowledging the Ethiopianist characters' prophetic faiths as also the wellsprings of their political consciousness, I counteract a politics of secularism that reads "secular" as progressive and "religious" as anachronistic by default.[306] My reading of Ethiopianist novels instead supports literary histories in which progress is multi-directional and activism takes many forms, including in and through religion. As I unfold this reading, I counterbalance my attention in the previous chapters to the political hegemony of white liberal Protestant traditions, offering a glimpse into the vast variety of U.S. faiths' political resonances or effects. Ethiopianist fiction's place in U.S. literary histories, in other words, depends upon recognizing not just faiths' ongoing *presence* in the U.S. but also precisely this variety in their political valences. I conclude the chapter and project by constructing an example of one such literary history, a narrative extending from eighteenth-century spiritual autobiographies through turn-of-the-twentieth-century Ethiopianist fiction to contemporary Afrofuturism. In using mystical stories about the

[306] Molly McGarry, *The Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 5.

past to confront the present and speculate alternative futures, these texts undertake a liberal-progressive political project that registers uneasily in many humanist paradigms. The texts model a revolutionary African American literary tradition that exceeds secular bounds.

Novel Forms of Ethiopianism

Ethiopianists were, on the whole, an idealist lot. They read the upward arc of Psalms 68:31 typologically as a sign Africa's long history of suffering was curving toward redemption. In most Ethiopianist art, for example, in Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Ode to Ethiopia" (1896) or Meta V.W. Fuller's sculpture "Ethiopia Awakening" (1914), that idealism translates into an allegorical or symbolic representation of Africa's prophesied deliverance from oppression. Dunbar describes, for instance, how the "Mother Race" is "writ on Glory's scroll/In characters of fire," and Fuller depicts a woman in Egyptian shrouds arising to new life. The prophecy at the heart of Psalms 68:31, "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God," offers the artists a metaphor that they sustain in their representations.

Ethiopianism's collision with the key forms of the turn-of-the-century novel, then—its linear plots and individual protagonists—gives rise to new questions.[307] What does it mean socially and politically for Psalms 68:31's foreseen moment to arrive? What are the mechanisms by which turn-of-the-century violence and discrimination will give way to that future? When Griggs's, Bruce's, and Hopkins's novels open, they seem all set to portray the racist present transforming into an age of "golden opportunity," as *The Hindered Hand* describes it (271). Each novel opens upon a young black male protagonist, an exceptional leader in his community and,

[307] In considering the collision of political and aesthetic forms that takes place in the Ethiopianist novel, I draw upon Caroline Levine's discussion of form in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3, 6, as "an arrangement of elements—an ordering, pattern, or shaping." I argue that the novel's plots and protagonists draw out Ethiopianism's affordances as a political form, its possibilities and constraints.

as the narrator makes clear, a promising facilitator of Ethiopianist prophecies. As the plots progress, these characters' actions become rife with anticipation, even urgency, in the face of the social changes they will help catalyze. But then they don't accomplish them. The novels end instead with either a narrow focus on the protagonist's personal successes or a broad picture of the community's, especially black women's, ongoing suffering and uncertainty.

One possible response to these endings, as this section explores, is to interpret them as flagging the pragmatic limits of Ethiopianist thought. The plot of Griggs's *Unfettered* offers a model case for this kind of critical analysis. The protagonist is Dorlan, an African American political writer and, as he discovers one afternoon, a long-lost African prince. Dorlan decides to fulfill his royal duties by leading racial reconciliation efforts in the U.S., and he spends much of the novel investigating how best to do so. When he finally shows his proposal, "Dorlan's Plan," to his love interest Morlene, she is so convinced of its merits that she agrees to marry him. The plot's conclusion, then, looks ahead to the couple's happy marriage. When the narrator invites readers to "bid this loving and laboring couple a fond adieu" in the final line, it seems the couple's relationship is the only form of closure the novel needs (215). The book's next page, however, already reminds readers of the question this happy ending leaves unanswered. What is "Dorlan's Plan"? Readers never directly read the contents of the plan in the course of the novel, nor do they know whether it succeeds in bringing about the changes that Morlene expects. Seemingly anticipating these concerns, Griggs published *Unfettered* with a "sequel" that "place[d] on record a copy of Dorlan's Plan" for those readers "disposed to question Morlene's judgment" (220). Delineated in the subtitle as a "Dissertation on the Race Problem," "Dorlan's Plan" lists areas of life (religion, education, the home) that African Americans must improve to "fulfill their high destiny" in the future (239). The introduction to the text, however, suggests not

that these changes *should* happen but rather that they already *have* happened: it addresses an imagined audience living after the successful enactment of "Dorlan's Plan." By adopting this future historical perspective, the novel's sequel skips over the present of its turn-of-the-century readers. The text imagines social changes that are necessary and even how the U.S. will be different upon their completion. What it cannot imagine is how those changes will begin. The early twentieth-century United States is the novel's absent center.

John Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* can hardly be subject to the same critique since the novel, published serially, was never finished. Still, considering the last published installment ended with the words "to be continued" (106), readers might speculate— what would satisfactorily resolve the novel's convoluted plot?[308] The protagonist Sadipe is a brilliant African detective and, as his brother suggests at the novel's start, an embodiment of the "magnificent possibilities" that stretch before "Ethiopia" (18). Sadipe travels the world for his assigned case and, in each stop, defies and ironizes Western stereotypes of African barbarism. Yet, for all he does to correct characters' (and readers') prejudices about Africa, his celebration of Africans' liberal individualism ultimately upholds, albeit in an inverted iteration, the oppressive Western social structures that he critiques. By the end of the novel, if Ethiopia's "star is in the ascendant," that ascendancy seems dependent on exceptional individuals' ability to rise above and thus evade otherwise pervasive racial violence and discrimination (18). The violence and discrimination itself remains intact to the novel's unfinished end.

[308] We do not know the economic, interpersonal, or artistic reasons that Bruce left *The Black Sleuth* unfinished, although we do know that the host periodical ran for one more issue after the last installment. Even before the missing ending, though, *The Black Sleuth*'s plot is non-sequential. John Gruesser's introduction to the 2002 edition compares the order in which events are presented to readers and the order in which readers must decipher that they actually unfolded. John Cullen Gruesser, "Introduction," *The Black Sleuth,* by John E. Bruce (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), xxii–xv.

In the cases of both *The Black Sleuth* and *Unfettered,* then, readers have opportunities to see through the protagonists' happy endings to oppressive social systems with no signs of giving way to new orders. In Griggs's *The Hindered Hand* and Hopkins's *Of One Blood,* the pattern changes. Rather than readers critiquing the novels' idealism, here the novels lead to a critique of Ethiopianism's idealism, portraying characters as painfully disillusioned to the movement's promises. In *The Hindered Hand,* a text with an Ethiopianist allusion in the title, the protagonist Earl responds to racial violence in the U.S. South by organizing political campaigns for African Americans' rights. In the final chapter, "Sorrow and Gladness," he has begun enacting his plan to increase African Americans' political power and, in keeping with the rhetoric of Ethiopianist prophecies, foresees the day when "the door of hope shall not be closed to any of [the U.S.'s] citizens because of the accident of birth" (289). He shares this news with his wife Eunice, whose despair over racial injustices in the U.S. had previously sent her to a sanitarium. But Eunice does not share Earl's confidence about the future. She responds to Earl's excitement by asking "quietly," "intelligently," "When will the duly authorized power see to it that the states live according to this decree and apply one test to voters of both races[?]" (290, 289). The question demands that Earl plot his Ethiopianist visions on a timeline, one keyed to the logistics of electoral politics. Eunice knows that improving race relations in the U.S. will require changing not just federal laws but also local commitments to enforcing them.

In his optimism, though, Earl does not register her concerns. Rather than wrestling with the immediate steps necessary to catalyze racial reconciliation in the U.S., he assures her with even more confidence, "I can't say, my darling; but it will surely come in time" (290). These vague assurances, intended to bolster Eunice's spirits, in reality confirm her concerns. Earl cannot envision the "race problem" being resolved as a direct consequence of present actions. As

Eunice exclaims, “Time! . . . Same old thing! Time! Bah! We shall all die in ‘time.’ . . . Earl, can’t you persuade the people to let justice do now what they are waiting for ‘time’ to do?” (290) Eunice’s contrast between “time” on one side and “justice” on the other cuts to the heart of Ethiopianist idealism. Earl can picture a more just future but not the mechanisms that will make that future arise out of the present. The narrator voices similar concerns in the novel’s final paragraph. Describing the other major character Ensal’s decision to emigrate to Africa, the narrator reasons that it might be to his advantage “should the demented Eunice prove to be a wiser prophet than the hopeful, irrepressible Earl; should the good people of America . . . grow busy, confused, or irresolute and fail . . . to firmly entrench the Negro in his political rights” (292). The conclusion reminds readers that the future Earl prophesies for African Americans depends upon structural changes that must be backed by the law and social practice. Rather than imagining African Americans’ rise to glory, the novel closes by emphasizing the future’s indeterminacy.

In Hopkins’s *Of One Blood*, that indeterminacy melds with fear and tragedy. Unlike Griggs’s and Bruce’s novels, *Of One Blood* balances its attention to the protagonist Reuel, a U.S. medical student who is passing for white and the prophesied prince of an ancient African city, with a plot that follows his half-sister Dianthe. Reuel meets Dianthe, then a stranger to him, after a tragic accident erases her memory. Previously Dianthe traveled with the Fisk Jubilee singers. Now Reuel has the light-skinned Dianthe assume she is white, and they get married. When Reuel’s racial identity prevents him from finding work in the U.S.—Reuel’s supposed friend Aubrey has publicized his blackness as part of a plot to steal Dianthe—Reuel accepts a job as a medic on an expedition to Africa. He leaves Dianthe with the plotting Aubrey, who is, unbeknownst to any of them, actually their half-brother and thus, according to American racial

logics, also black. On this trip Reuel learns about his royal lineage and his right to the ancient city of Telassar's throne. Meanwhile, back in the U.S., Aubrey manipulates and rapes Dianthe. When she learns that she, Aubrey, and Reuel are all half-siblings, she falls into a state of crazed despair. She plots Aubrey's murder, but the plan backfires, and Aubrey forces her to kill herself.

For Dianthe, then, Telassar's imminent restoration to glory is but a distant backdrop to everyday experiences of violence, suffering, and injustice. She, too, has royal blood, and she possesses the same spiritual gifts for which Reuel is honored, including an ability to communicate with the dead. Yet while Reuel escapes to Telassar, Dianthe is manipulated, raped, and murdered. This pattern of gendered violence pervades and defines Hopkins's novels. As Elizabeth Ammons and Lois Brown point out, Hopkins's first major novel *Contending Forces* (1900) also features a woman character who is raped, abused, deceived, and silenced, and, in *Of One Blood,* stories of the assault and enslavement of Dianthe's female ancestors quite literally haunt the main plot.[309] Ethiopia's anticipated redemption under Reuel's auspices offers no more than a vague glimmer of hope in a narrative pattern that is, for mixed-race women living in United States, "frightening and bleak."[310]

As for Reuel, he initially seems well positioned to reap the benefits of Ethiopia's promised redemption. The people of Telassar hail him as their long-lost king. He is invited to marry their "infinite[ly] attractive" queen (139). When the latter occurs, he thinks to himself, "Why not accept this pleasant destiny which held its alluring arms so seductively towards him?" (139). Yet this seductive fantasy—the antithesis to images of Ethiopia's arms outstretched in yearning—turns out to be just that: a fantasy. Once installed as the king of Telassar, Reuel is

[309] Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn of the Twentieth-Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 78; Lois Brown, *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 392, 397.
[310] Ammons, *Conflicting Stories,* 83.

haunted by "the memory of past joys," and he views "with serious apprehension" the "advance of mighty nations" on Africa (193). His saddened response— "Where will it stop? . . . What will the end be?"—applies equally to the novel's Ethiopianist narrative (193). The novel features characters whose immediate lives and livelihoods depend upon Ethiopia's prophesied restoration. Yet the "end"—the actual redemption—is hard to imagine amidst the realities of racial violence and Western imperialism that the novel acknowledges. The only hope or consolation the novel can offer in the face of such tragedies and threats is God's inscrutability:

> To our human intelligence these truths depicted in this feeble work may seem terrible, — even horrible. But who shall judge the handiwork of God, the Great Craftsman! Caste prejudice, race pride, boundless wealth, scintillating intellects refined by all the arts of the intellectual world, are but puppets in His hand, for His promises stand, and He will prove His words, 'Of one blood have I made all races of men.' (193)

This vision of the future, complete with its image of God as a puppeteer playing with African Americans' fates, shares little of the confidence of Psalms 68:31's "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God." The syntax of the biblical passage features the future, the endgame. *Of One Blood* demonstrates that, if the focus shifts to present mechanisms of social change, Ethiopia's path to redemption feels less inevitable. As Hopkins's conclusion makes clear, Ethiopianism asks Africans and African Americans to entrust their fates to an omnipotent God whose actions are beyond their understanding. The potential counterpoint to Ethiopianist optimism, then, as Reuel models in his closing thoughts, is a frightening sense of uncertainty amidst very real threats of imperialism and racial violence. For individuals living in the turn-of-the-century present, anticipating Ethiopia's redemption can seem like a hopeless, even a paralyzing exercise.

Varieties of Nineteenth-Century Racial Hierarchies

For contemporary literary scholars, the doubts to which Hopkins's, Griggs's, and Bruce's novels give rise as they plot out Ethiopianism's prophecies should sound familiar. They are the kinds of concerns that arise in classic Marxist critiques of religion's work as ideology. The novels essentially beat twentieth-century theorists to the punch in exposing Ethiopianists' rosy visions of the future as difficult to connect to present social needs. Yet that critique is not the only or final lesson we might glean from the novels' depictions of Ethiopianism. The novels may lack evidence of the present viability of Ethiopianist prophecies. *Of One Blood* and *The Hindered Hand* may also show characters struggling to confront the uncertainty that Ethiopianism creates. But they also start with the understanding that Ethiopianist thought is an act of faith, one that, when sustained, has the power to change the identities the characters claim, the worlds they inhabit, and the futures they can imagine. The texts model how accepting Ethiopianism's epistemological challenge—that is, internalizing cyclical histories rooted in faith and collective memory—can foster resilient racial communities. Ethiopianism offers characters a means of wrestling with present injustices and imagining alternative realities moving forward.

As theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests, this two-step process of owning suffering and practicing hope is what underlies prophecy's radical community-building potential.[311] Brueggemann argues that the first question of people living within oppressive social structures cannot be what is "realistic or politically practical or economically viable."[312] The first question must be about imagination: "How can we have enough freedom to imagine and articulate a real

[311] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 16.
[312] Ibid., 39.

historical newness in our situation?"[313] Ethiopianism gives believers an impetus for imagining a historical newness. Within this prophetic framework, the closing lines of *Of One Blood* require a second look. The narrator's final reminder about God's inscrutability may seem like a troubling response to the characters' suffering, a platitude that effectively instructs readers not to question the divine order. A less skeptical reading, however, allows the text's closing lines to affirm a radical faith in historical change amidst a seemingly endless present of violence. Hopkins's text acknowledges head-on the horrors of racial violence and imperialism, then it *still* invites readers to trust that "[God's] promises stand" and "He will prove His words" (193). That faith only makes sense if God, in his inscrutability, is also believed to be a God of change, one who has a biblically documented habit of siding with marginalized people to help them turn the tides of history. By asking readers to affirm their faith in this inscrutable God of change, Hopkins also asks them to orientate their actions toward a future that differs from the present—an active stance, energized by hope, as opposed to a defeatist reconciliation or passive waiting. To call Ethiopianism idealist or out-of-touch with reality is to overlook how social apparatuses like the nation-state or segregation laws are, likewise, acts of imagination, ones brought into being by power. The role of prophetic traditions, then, is to call forth a community that resists the dominant imaginative project, that refuses to "live inside" the imagination of the oppressor.[314] Ethiopianism's political thrust lies in its religious way of seeing reality otherwise.

Hopkins's, Griggs's, and Bruce's novels participate in this act of redefining reality by two means: inverting dominant racial hierarchies and using nonlinear histories to document turn-of-the-century experiences of racial violence. To the first end, Hopkins, Griggs, and Bruce employ Ethiopianism's religious framework to recalibrate dominant nineteenth-century theories

[313] Ibid.
[314] Ibid., xix.

of white superiority. In dominant nineteenth-century racial hierarchies, white and nonwhite races all supposedly develop on a linear trajectory toward the same general goal: a Protestant-inflected Western secularity.[315] The Ethiopianist novels rearrange these dominant racial hierarchies— and thus support alternative racial identities—by playing with two of their key variables: who is supposedly in the lead, and why. Regarding the former, Hopkins, Griggs, and Bruce varyingly depict Africans and African Americans, as opposed to white Europeans or Americans, as fit to usher in Ethiopianism's prophetic promises. John Gruesser, the only literary scholar recently to offer a comparative reading of turn-of-the-century Ethiopianist novels, organizes his interpretation of Hopkins's, Griggs's, and Bruce's novels around this variable. As Gruesser demonstrates, readers must differentiate Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* from Hopkins's and Griggs's novels for how it radically affirms turn-of-the-century Africans or African Americans. In Griggs's novels, as a point of contrast, the structure of dominant U.S. racial hierarchies remains basically intact: white Americans surpass African Americans who surpass Africans in a universal march from savagery to civilization.[316] Unlike some nineteenth-century racial theories, like those of polygenesists, Griggs's novels attribute Africans' and African Americans' supposed lack of progress to external hindrances or "fetters," rather than innate biological or spiritual deficiencies.[317] They explain, for example, that "the climate, the surface, the flora, and the fauna" of Africa has kept its people "in civilization's backyard," just as the U.S.'s "repressive" political

[315] This concept of a Protestant secularism or secular Protestantism may seem like an oxymoronic one. But, as Tracy Fessenden shows in *Culture and Redemption*, it is, in fact, the default mode of U.S. political culture; it is the reason the U.S. can claim a secular national identity even as, say, public school calendars align with Christian holidays and invocations of "God bless America" pepper official government correspondences.

[316] The African paraders in *Unfettered*, for example, credit Africa's well-buried ancient treasure to a white explorer, who counseled the African king that it would be valuable once "civilization reached Africa" (164).

[317] We might well critique Griggs for his essentialist or romantic racialist depictions of Africans and African Americans, but, when doing so, we should also bear in mind, for comparison's sake, what he was writing against. *The Hindered Hand* was a direct response to Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (New York: Doubleday, Page, & Co., 1902), the first novel in a trilogy that paints the Klu Klux Klan as the heroic keepers of order in the Reconstruction-era South.

system has hindered African Americans' developments (*UF* 165, *HH* 61). Yet even that apparently lenient logic (by nineteenth-century standards) makes nonwhite races' potential for world leadership dependent upon their ability to beat white Americans at their own civilizing game. It also suggests that African Americans, who have had more contact with the West, are far closer to achieving that leadership status than Africans. Ensal predicts, for example, that "the American Negro, soul wise through suffering, should come forth as a strong man to run a race," and "Dorlan's Plan" pronounces that the African American "who has hitherto followed [is] called upon to lead" (*HH* 81, *UF* 231). In short, Griggs suggests that African Americans specifically, not Ethiopians generally, will become the future prophets Psalms 68:31 ordains.

Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* inverts this U.S.-centric racial hierarchy. Rather than assuming African Americans are best suited to lead a worldwide racial awakening, Bruce suggests Africans deserve to be entrusted with their own futures. This recognition likely derived from his direct, regular interactions with African people— an experience not many other African American authors of the era could boast.[318] Born into slavery, Bruce became a prominent journalist in the United States and later a correspondent for newspapers in London, the Caribbean, and Africa. He also co-founded the Negro Society for Historical Research, which brought together scholars from Africa and the African diaspora.[319] From that firsthand familiarity with African culture, Bruce depicts a cast of African characters whose intellect, morality, and political consciousness exceed those of both the white and African American characters they encounter. The white American sea captain, Captain De Forrest, for example, is surprised when he learns on a visit to Africa that the protagonist Sadipe's tribe, the Yoruba people, have their

[318] Bruce is thought to be the first African American author with extensive knowledge of late-nineteenth-century Africa. The only earlier depictions of Africa are from Griggs, Delany, and Hopkins, all of whom rely on exotic stereotypes. Gruesser, "Introduction," xv.
[319] Ibid., xiii.

own grammar books, hymn books, local histories, and translations of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew (7, 15). Sadipe's brother Mojola, in turn, is surprised to learn on a trip to England that white Christians ask him "all sorts of foolish questions about Africa . . . which disclosed their crass ignorance" (13). Both parties' stereotypes are disproved, but their views must move in opposite directions.

In addition to being exceptionally intelligent, Bruce's African characters are also exceptionally religious—that is, religious but not in the hypocritical way of white Americans. As Mojola reasons, white Americans call themselves "the most Christian people on earth" yet extend their "sense of brotherhood" only to themselves (14). In Africa, in contrast, Christians and Muslims like himself and his family equally practice religious tolerance. They preach "the true Gospel—that God is no respecter of persons" (14–15).[320] Mojola also critiques white Westerners' materialist greed, aggressive imperialism, and general cultural complacency, their tendency to believe that "civilization . . . began and will end with them" (7). This complacency trickles down, in turn, to the African American characters, who resign themselves to the turn-of-the-century U.S.'s unjust social order. Far from the heroic protagonists in Griggs's novels, the most prominently featured African American in *The Black Sleuth,* the president of a Southern college, tells Sadipe when he visits that "we are obliged to submit to these [prejudiced laws] because we are helpless, and can do no better" (39). Whereas Griggs implies that African Americans' contact with the "modernized" West makes them exceptionally fit for world leadership, Bruce suggests that white Americans' influence has weakened African Americans' ability to envision a more just future.

[320] Mojola is paraphrasing Acts 10: 34–35, in which Jesus's apostle Peter states, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."

Yet while Bruce reverses Africans', African Americans', and white Americans' positions in U.S. racial hierarchies, the key traits that he celebrates in the African characters—a blend of religiously-grounded rationality and morality—align with dominant models. *The Black Sleuth* neglects to enact, in other words, Ethiopianists' second method for upending racial hierarchies: redefining the very traits that makes races fit for world leadership. By this second metric, Bruce and Griggs are actually alike. Both uphold civility—a Protestant missionary-inspired blend of rationality and morality—as the highest achievement of any race. Comparing examples from their novels can best illustrate how. In *The Black Sleuth*, white Americans' belief that they must "civilize" Africa is a recurrent point of irony. As Mojola tells Captain De Forrest about travelling through Europe, "I do not now regret that I left the 'centre of civilization' and returned to the land of 'darkness and barbarism,' as Africa is ignorantly styled by those who do not know better" (14). Similarly, Sadipe denounces an American missionary's belief that he is called to civilize and educate the "black heathen" by admonishing, "I will say this much: that the so-called 'heathens' of Africa are not nearly so barbarous and inhospitable to the stranger within their gates, nor are they as inhuman and bloodthirsty as the so-called civilized white Christians of the South" (48). In both cases, the African characters invert Americans' assumptions about Western civilization and African savagery. They prove more educated, more moral, and more religiously tolerant than their U.S. counterparts. At the same time, they leave the structure of the civilized-savage binary, particularly the assumed supremacy of "civilization," intact. Bruce's African characters indeed align with the white American characters in applauding rational, ethical behavior as the measure of various races' development on a progressive scale. They understand a different race to be the one most fully developed, but they agree on how "development" can be defined.

The same can be said for Griggs's works. "Dorlan's Plan," the fifty-page essay that follows the main narrative of *Unfettered,* outlines Dorlan's ideas for racial reconciliation in the twentieth-century United States. In the proposal, Dorlan lists several areas of life upon which African Americans must improve to fulfill "the high destiny unto which [the race] was called" (237, 239). These areas include: first, the home and family; second, religion and churches; third, education and public schools; fourth, higher education; and so on through aspects of African American life ranging from reading tastes to eating habits to neighborhood environments. As Dorlan moves through the list, the same "mental and moral characteristics"—domesticity, enlightenment, ethics, and self-reliance—repeatedly surface as the goals for African American living (237). These goals are also the ideals of white American middle-class Protestantism, as Dorlan's discussion of the "proper" religious life particularly demonstrates. Elsewhere in his work, Griggs humorously caricatures what he portrays as some distinctive aspects of African American religiosity: loud and emotional worship services, charismatic and commanding preachers, and laypeople's quasi-spiritualist "superstitions," for example.[321] As a Baptist preacher, Griggs perhaps drew these images of embodied black faiths from his own experiences. The traditions are a far cry, however, from the practices or worldviews that Dorlan endorses in his plan for the future of the African American race. As Dorlan explains, "Our racial organization must foster such conceptions of religion as will make its ethical teachings, applicable in this world, more prominent. With the home life cared for and proper religious instruction guaranteed, our racial organization will have laid a secure foundation" (245). Dorlan's understanding of a "proper" religiosity coincides with his concerns for proper homes or domesticity in the previous section and proper learning or rationality in the subsequent one.

[321] These descriptions derive from *The Hindered Hand,* 44, and Griggs's perhaps most famous novel *Imperium in Imperio* (New York: Arno Press, 1969; first published 1899), 19, 20.

Religion here blends with morality or even civic duty: it is an example of the secularized Protestantism that Tracy Fessenden identifies in her work.[322] As Dorlan depicts, "proper religious instruction" holds the promise of improving or civilizing African Americans, a narrative similar to those white American missionaries had long used to justify racial violence and imperialist action.

Hopkins's *Of One Blood* offers an alternative framework. As for its perspectives on Africans and African Americans, the novel does not subvert dominant hierarchies as completely as *The Black Sleuth.* Reuel, having been educated and Christianized in the West, is understood to be particularly fit to lead the African people of Telassar—a classic example of African American exceptionalism. Yet, while the characters honor him for being educated and Christian, the ultimate signs of his prophetic potential are the unusual spiritual gifts he has acquired through his African lineage. He is exceptional, in other words, not because he is civilized but because he is capable of catalyzing Ethiopia's radical religious restoration. This is not to say Hopkins brushes civility aside completely: *Of One Blood*, too, depicts a blend of rationalism and secular-Protestant morality as superior to "barbarism," on the one hand, and greedy imperialism on the other (79). However, in the end, Reuel realizes that his and other African and African American characters' spiritual epistemologies are superior to "all the wealth and learning of modern times" (145). In *Of One Blood*, the future is defined as a moment of religious reawakening. For that reason, Africans' and African Americans' divinely endowed spiritual gifts or mystical powers are the keys to their leadership potential.

"God Requireth that which is Past": Unreal Realities and the Imaginative Power of History

[322] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 10.

The second means by which Hopkins's, Griggs's, and Bruce's novels reimagine violent turn-of-the-century realities otherwise is by documenting those realities in the context of longer Ethiopianist histories. The novels accomplish the first part of that representational feat—narrating characters' and readers' lived experiences—by hybridizing genres with few associations to traditional literary realism. Hopkins's, Griggs's, and Bruce's novels conglomerate nineteenth-century detective stories, adventure tales, sentimental fiction, melodramas, and political romances. The structural results are complicated: the plots involve dozens of characters, long chains of events (presented out of order in Bruce's case), and multiple settings in the U.S. and abroad. Yet precisely because they draw from so many genres, the novels represent injustices and acts of resistance that do not register in U.S. literary histories or theories of realism traditionally conceived. As Susan Gillman suggests of Griggs's work, the sentimental tropes and action-packed plots in Ethiopianist novels are not "vehicles, covers, or distractions" for political projects.[323] Rather, these threads make the projects possible: Griggs and the other Ethiopianist writers turn to romance and sensationalism to convey unthinkable present realities before they become historical erasures. This melding of genres is crucial for expanding the novel's conventional "realist topography" to include what Dana Luciano calls the "fire and romance" of African American experience.[324] Paralleling Gillman, Luciano reminds contemporary readers of Hopkins's fiction that the "sensationalist and Gothic" elements in *Of One Blood* are not "escapes" from concrete political realities.[325] They are rather acts of critical memory, chronicling experiences that U.S. histories tend to write off as "unreal."

[323] Susan Gillman, *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 75.
[324] Dana Luciano, "Passing Shadows," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 148.
[325] Ibid., 149.

These often overlooked realities include traumatic instances of racial violence like public lynchings. They also include characters' spiritual experiences. In *Of One Blood,* in particular, characters' interactions in the material world are offset and explained by otherworldly exchanges. Reuel and Dianthe communicate with spirits, arise from death-like trances, learn news by "mesmeric forces," and see visions of the future (89). These spiritual gifts lead the characters to lost histories and shape their exceptional leadership potential. Still, the gifts are less sensationalist than just special: they are highly valued in the theologically understood reality that the characters inhabit. Turn-of-the-century readers might have recognized these heightened sensory experiences as tenable parts of Spiritualism, the immensely popular nineteenth-century religious movement devoted to speaking with the dead that I explored in Chapter Two. The characters' expansive worldviews allow them to experience realities beyond the material world.

The next step in the novels' imaginative projects is fitting characters' and readers' unreal realities, their present suffering and spiritual insights, into longer Ethiopianist narratives. Ethiopianists believed that, by God's favor, Africans had led the ancient world in faithfulness, knowledge, and material wealth, a status to which they would someday return. Hopkins's, Griggs's, and Bruce's characters take from these prophetic religious histories both a vision of an alternative social reality and a motive, racial pride, for pursuing it. They also glean an understanding of time that transforms that ancient vision into a relevant source of turn-of-the-century hope. In most late-nineteenth-century temporal models, time was linear, and societies progressed unidirectionally from primitive to more modern, enlightened, or industrial states. Ethiopianists aligned with several other radical religious movements in the nineteenth century—Mormonism, Christian fundamentalism, and Zionism, for example— in believing instead that societies could cycle back to restore purer or less fallen moments from the biblical past. As

religious historian Jan Shipps explains, these "radical restoration" movements perceived the present as "a return to an original situation," an "experiential 'living through' of sacred events in a new age."[326] Rather than a nostalgic longing for the past, then, Ethiopianist histories represented an ongoing promise about the future. Ethiopianists had reason to experience the biblical histories they narrated as intimately connected to their own present circumstances.

Of the turn-of-the-century Ethiopianist novels, this nonlinear temporality manifests most clearly in Hopkins's *Of One Blood.* When Reuel arrives in the ancient city of Telassar, he finds a statue in the city's center engraved with the following from Ecclesiastes: "That which hath been, is now; and that which is to be, hath already been; and God requireth that which is past" (120). The statue makes explicit a set of temporal paradoxes that Reuel begins exploring long before his arrival in Telassar. When Reuel uses mesmerism to try to resurrect Dianthe, originally his patient, from a death-like trance, his fellow doctors reject the idea, telling him that "it smacks of the supernatural" and "the time of miracles is past" (33). But Reuel does not make the same associations between modernity and secularity, nor the same divisions between past and present. Instead, in keeping with other nineteenth-century radical restorationists, he believes in a cosmological timeline that exceeds humans' lifespans and recorded histories. As he expresses to his friend and later betrayer Aubrey, "We are but barbarians in our ideas of the beginning, interim, and end of our creation," a perspective that motivates him to seek communions between his current earthly and other spiritual realms (33). He and Dianthe both then achieve such communions, communicating in the present with spirits from their pasts and futures. These points of connection between the living and dead disrupt the linear chain of daily events that Reuel describes as the "beaten path of conventionality" (28).

[326] Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 71, 52.

These initial renderings of a nonlinear spiritual temporality prepare readers to digest Reuel's more complex experiences of cyclical time in Telassar. Reuel's temporal whereabouts become hazy from the moment he unknowingly begins his journey to Telassar. As Reuel explores the ancient ruins of the African city of Meroe one night, he smells a "subtle odor" and loses consciousness (112). The story picks up again as Reuel awakes four days later "from profound unconsciousness, deep, merciful, oblivious to pain and the flight of time" (112). To register the abruptness of this transition, contemporary readers must recall that Hopkins's novel, like Bruce's, was originally published serially. Hopkins could thus accentuate jumps and lags in the novel's plot by aligning them with regulated starts and stops in the audience's reading experience. In the case of Reuel's transition to Telassar, Hopkins uses the pacing of serial publication to reinforce Ethiopianism's unusual temporality.[327] For readers of the original version of the novel, the break in the action while Reuel is unconscious would have lasted two months—until the unusually late next issue of *The Colored American Magazine* was published.[328] Although only four days have passed in the plot, the phrase "oblivious to . . . the flight of time" and the break in the audience's reading experience together create a sense that Reuel has awoken at some distance, both spatial *and temporal*, from his previous whereabouts. The disjuncture or gap in the plot conveys a temporal experience that defies linear patterns of cause-and-effect.

Historians of science fiction might note that this episode resembles early figurations of time-travel. Reuel seems to leap from one historical moment to another with only a rupture, no

[327] Lauren Goodlad suggests in her work on seriality and culture that the "regular intervals of waiting" involved in consuming serialized texts prolongs and deepens audiences' relationships to those texts. The texts call forth a "ritual" of "enjoying new installments followed by interludes of contemplation, discussion, and expectation." Lauren M.E. Goodlad, "The *Mad Men* in the Attic: Seriality and Identity in the Narrative of Capitalist Globalization," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, 2 (2012), 201–35, 204.
[328] Reuel's loss of consciousness concludes the March 1903 serialization, and the typically monthly *Colored American Magazine* did not publish an April edition.

logical sequence of events, between them. They might also be inclined to criticize that plot device as a political dead end: scholars including Fredric Jameson have argued that turn-of-the-century time-travel narratives, when they lack a "mechanism" for transitioning from present to utopic future, illustrate a "failure of imagination" that parallels "that of the political revolutions designed to achieve the same transition in real life."[329] The difference is that Reuel never actually travels back through linear time. The novel instead asks readers to accept, on faith and in keeping with Ethiopianist principles, that Telassar's present radically restores the past. At times, the characters describe Telassar as a remnant of Meroe and themselves as the "direct descendants" of its inhabitants (114). Yet they do more than carry on the traditions of an ancient city. They instead see themselves as the "preserved specimen" of a chosen people, the few "faithful" that still remain among Africa's "fallen" race (119, 115). When Reuel first arrives in Telassar, he describes encountering "shadowy images of past scenes and happenings" that feel "perfectly familiar" to him (119). His embodied déjà vu experience makes sense in an Ethiopianist framework. *Of One Blood* shows Reuel living out the paradox that the present reanimates the biblical past.

The consequence of Reuel's experience is that he feels the imminence of Africa's glorious past in his turn-of-the-century life. With other radical restorationists, he senses that an alternative to the unjust present is near. Reuel does not sustain that feeling of closeness to a different social reality; by the end of the novel, readers see his faith fade before fears of the oppression that he can see looming. While he inhabits the Ethiopianist worldview, however, Reuel feels a new sense of racial pride and unity, even as he also confronts the injustices that surround him. Whereas previously he had "carefully hidden his Ethiopian extraction from the

[329] Fredric Jameson, "In Hyperspace," *London Review of Books,* 37, 10 (2015), https://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n17/fredric-jameson/in-hyperspace.

knowledge of the world," now he feels honored to claim such an illustrious racial heritage (126). His closeness to history also imparts to him a new sense of pan-African community. Rather than viewing Africa as "barbaric," the stagnant counterpart to U.S. progress, he sees them both moving on a cyclical trajectory, equally in need of spiritual leadership (77). A knowledge of Africa's biblical past combined with a faith in a God of historical change clarifies for him Africans' and African Americans' shared claim on the future.

Reuel is unique in the Ethiopianist novels for experiencing a literal convergence of ancient past and turn-of-the-century present—the most dramatic, if enigmatic, expression of Ethiopianism's cyclical temporality. What the novels all model is the intimate connection between past and present and the transformative power of that knowledge for characters' imaginative projects. Mostly, the characters become acquainted with Africa's biblical history the same way that readers do: by hearing stories of it secondhand. *The Black Sleuth, Dorlan's Plan*, and *Of One Blood* all contain full chapters, sometimes multiple chapters, in which the main plot pauses and characters narrate to one another an Ethiopianist history of Africa.[330] These pedagogical episodes, these "stops in time," as Susan Gillman describes them in her reading of *Of One Blood,* enable the characters to contextualize their present experiences within historical narratives they would otherwise not encounter.[331] In *The Black Sleuth,* for example, the story of Sadipe's exemplary detective work begins after his brother corrects a visiting American's racist perceptions of Africa for three chapters. In *Dorlan's Plan,* Dorlan is fortified in his activism by learning from a cohort of visiting African leaders that he has a key role in restoring Africa to a once-glorious state. In *Of One Blood,* Reuel makes sense of his experiences in Telassar because he previously heard a geology professor lecture on Africa's "prehistoric existence of

[330] *The Hindered Hand* does not contain any such pedagogical episodes. It is unique among the four Ethiopianist novels in not evoking Ethiopianism's signature religious historiography at all.
[331] Gilman, *Blood Talk,* 44.

magnificence" and because Telassar's elders throw him a celebratory feast in which they recite their civilization's history as a "song in blank verse" (95, 122). In each case, the history being conveyed provides a framework within which the listener's present experiences or actions take on new meaning.

Most importantly, like Reuel's experience in Telassar, the characters' new historical knowledge strengthens their racial identities and sense of connection to black communities. These communities, forged around faithful visions of the past and future, exist in opposition to dominant social and political structures in the present. When Sadipe's father encounters a racist visitor, for example, he uses his knowledge of Ethiopianist history to assess, "This white man . . . either forgets, or does not know, that the very Bible he professes to believe came from the East, not the West" (22). Through such characters' examples, the Ethiopianist novels teach readers how to invoke biblical histories to resist the dominant consciousness. The result of this change in perspective is not always hope. When Dianthe learns the story of her family's royal line, a legend going back to the glories of ancient Africa, she feels all the more violated by Aubrey's sexual violence, and, in shame and indignation, plots his murder (175). What Ethiopianism's religious historiography does consistently engender in the characters, then, is energy or passion: they are awakened to a more invested or determined positionality. When Hopkins writes a nonfictional Ethiopianist tract *A Primer of Facts Pertaining to the Early Greatness of the African Race* two years after *Of One Blood* (in 1905), she responds to a question about how readers can "help forward the time of restoration" by instructing them to "becom[e] thoroughly familiar with the

meagre details of Ethiopian history" and to "foster race pride."[332] The Ethiopianist novels demonstrate how such shifts in consciousness or imagination undergird revolutionary ends.

Back to the Future?: Speculating African American Literary Histories

In using spiritual narratives to construct or imagine racial histories, Hopkins's, Griggs's, and Bruce's Ethiopianist novels enact an African American intellectual tradition that Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Kathryn Lofton call "mystical historiography" and John Ernest calls "liberation historiography."[333] Ethiopianists were certainly not the first African Americans to recognize the power of histories, particularly religious histories, to foster racial unity and orient people toward political action. Starting in the eighteenth century, African Americans drew upon evangelicalism's narratives of resurrection, rebirth, and regeneration to historicize their experiences of suffering and construct their own identities.[334] These histories frequently did not or could not adhere to the conventions of dominant scholarly narratives: they were not continuous, developmental, clearly authored, and externally verifiable.[335] Nor, as so much of American historiography is inclined, did they portray African Americans' past as the struggle of modern individual men and women against the limits of liberal democratic politics. As Maffly-Kipp and Lofton contend, early African American histories instead blended romantic notions of the past with prophetic claims about the future, arming audiences to define themselves despite

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[332] Pauline E. Hopkins, "A Primer of Facts Pertaining to the Early Greatness of the African Race and the Possibility of Restoration by Its Descendants—with Epilogue," in *Pauline Hopkins: A Literary Biography,* ed. Hanna Wallinger (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005; first published 1905), 305.
[333] Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Kathryn Lofton, "Introduction," *Women's Work: An Anthology of African American Women's Historical Writings from Antebellum America to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Kathryn Lofton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5; John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8.
[334] Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12.
[335] Maffly-Kipp and Lofton, "Introduction," 6.

centuries of omission from historical records.[336] Such histories were culturally pragmatic: they told "the stories that needed to be heard, not those stories that needed to be proven."[337]

Ethiopianism's connection to that religious-historical tradition suggests its value for an African American literary history that resists the narrative power of secularization. In "From Edwards to Baldwin," Joanna Brooks writes that a key step in disentangling literary histories from stories of religious decline, stories that see Puritan faiths give way to Romantic instincts and then finally realist knowledge, is to develop new narratives, ones that account for the "radically discontinuous power of religion in shaping U.S. literatures."[338] Ethiopianist novels offer a fruitful link for one possible religiously heterodox African American literary history. As I have described, when Hopkins, Griggs, and Bruce wrote their Ethiopianist novels, they entered a long tradition of African American religious-historical writing. They followed thinkers since the eighteenth century in using Christian narratives of rebirth and redemption to grapple with patterns of violence and resistance in African American experience. When historians trace what came *after* Ethiopianism instead of before, however, they tend to lose this speculative religious thread. They tend not to associate twentieth-century political movements like Black Nationalism with Ethiopianism's distinctive blend of mysticism, history, and future visions.

To conclude, then, I want to highlight how turn-of-the-century Ethiopianist novels propelled longstanding traditions of religiously oriented speculative fiction into the twentieth century and beyond. For an example, we can look to the tradition of black Atlantic speculative fiction known since the early 1990s as Afrofuturism. When Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism, he used it to refer to "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and

[336] Ibid., 4–5.
[337] Ibid., 13.
[338] Joanna Brooks, "From Edwards to Baldwin: Heterodoxy, Discontinuity, and New Narratives of American Religious-Literary History," *American Literary History,* 22, 2 (2010), 439–53, 439, 441.

addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture."[339] Afrofuturism's focus on Western technoculture is specific to its contemporary moment. The overarching questions that critics see Afrofuturist texts raising, however, are remarkably similar to those of Ethiopianist novels. Afrofuturism asks, in Dery's words, "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?"[340] The implicit answer, like that of Ethiopianism, is yes—but not easily. As Douglas Kilgore De Witt describes, Afrofuturism is a "responsible storytelling, a challenge to remember the past that instructs the present and can build a future."[341]

Building a genealogy between Ethiopianism and Afrofuturism helps to contextualize this storytelling within long traditions of African American religious writing. Despite describing Afrofuturism as an epistemology that can be applied to any genre, literary scholars have almost exclusively examined it as a subset of science fiction. Histories of Afrofuturism, then, tend to overlap with histories of that genre: they identify proto-Afrofuturist texts in staples of the early sci-fi canon like Martin Delany's *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859), Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine" (1899), Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), Edward Johnson's *Light Ahead for the Negro* (1906), and Du Bois's "The Comet."[342] These texts are landmarks in the history of science fiction, and Afrofuturism's perceived growth out of that tradition has shaped its scholarly appeal. By habitually approaching Afrofuturism from a science fiction angle,

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[339] Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.
[340] Ibid.
[341] Douglas Kilgore De Witt, "Afrofuturism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction,* ed. Rob Latham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 563.
[342] I have compiled this list from Lisa Yaszek's "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," *Socialism and Democracy*, 20, 3 (2006), 41–60, and Samuel Delany's "Racism and Science Fiction," in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas (New York: Aspect Press, 2000). Yaszek includes all but Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* on her list. Delany does not examine "The Gooph'red Grapevine" or "The Comet."

however, we can miss that these texts were all also, with the exception of *Light Ahead for the Negro,* deeply invested in nineteenth-century religious debates or traditions. In the cases of Delany, Griggs, and Du Bois, they can even be linked to Ethiopianism specifically: all three authors wrote texts espousing Ethiopianist principles.[343]

That shift in perspective matters because, as I demonstrated with Hopkins's, Griggs's, and Bruce's Ethiopianist plots, accounting for faith-based epistemologies can change our sense of the political affordances and constraints of particular aesthetic forms. In the case of Afrofuturism, the change in perspective means envisioning a future that is at once technologically and spiritually advanced. Rather than anticipating the eventual triumph of scientific epistemologies over religious ones— the standard arc of a Western secularization narrative— Afrofuturists envision technological innovation and religious faith playing equally integral roles in Africans' and African Americans' futures. They believe Africans and people of African descent can benefit from holding intertwined scientific and spiritual knowledges.

We might find no better example of this Afrofuturist hybrid of technology and mysticism than in the recent blockbuster film *Black Panther* (2018). Although the character of the Black Panther was introduced into Marvel Comics by white writers in 1966, the story on the screen is the vision of contemporary black artists: director Ryan Coogler, screenplay co-writers Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole, costume designer Ruth Carter, and production designer Hannah Beachler, to name a few. Much like Reuel in Hopkins's *Of One Blood*, *Black Panther*'s protagonist T'Challa is the destined prince of a utopic African nation, Wakanda, that remains hidden from the modern world. Wakanda is the epitome of technological advancement: panoramic shots of the complex cityscape and scenes featuring Wakanda's cutting edge military

[343] Martin Delaney wrote *The Principles of Ethnology* in 1879. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote an Ethiopianist play *The Star of Ethiopia* in 1917.

and transportation systems reinforce its preeminent scientific status. In dominant Western progress narratives, Wakanda would certainly also represent the culmination of secularity. But here the opposite is the case: the African citizens' scientific practices blend with ancient religious traditions that include herbal healings, direct spirit communication, and ancestral blessings. Characters practices these traditions in conjunction with their scientific prowess, blending their multiple knowledges to sustain and advance their futuristic society.

Locating Afrofuturism in a line of speculative religious histories including Ethiopianism foregrounds these spiritual elements of *The Black Panther*. The historical pattern attunes us to faith-based visions of the future that are still proliferating. Scholar of science, technology, and social inequality Alondra Nelson states in a 2011 interview on Afrofuturism that the point of coining the term was to take texts or cultural objects that "seemed strange," that were "outliers" in the corpus of African American literature, and help them make sense in a tradition.[344] Connecting Afrofuturism to mystical religious historiographies via Ethiopianism enriches and expands the boundaries of that tradition. Ethiopianism calls for literary histories that can chronicle faiths' challenges to oppressive social structures and recognize them as foundations for identities, communities, and knowledges— from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first.

[344] Alondra Nelson, "Interview on Afrofuturism," *Afrofuturism,* 1 January 2011, afrofuturism.net.