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A LANGUAGE “BURNING AND GOD-GIVEN”: THE CREATIVE FORM OF  
RELIGIOUS WRITING IN AMERICA, 1790-1865

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A Dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in English.

written under the direction of

Gregory S. Jackson

and approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October, 2013

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“A LANGUAGE ‘BURNING AND GOD-GIVEN’: THE CREATIVE FORM  
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My dissertation describes how religious ideas shaped aesthetic innovation in popular American literature from the early national moral novel to racial uplift fiction. Nineteenth-century writing, particularly fiction, was shaped by conflicting pressures, including historicism (the belief that history reflected social forces rather than divine intentions), romanticism (which celebrated artistic originality), and the resurgence of evangelical religion. As a result, I argue, traditional religious ideas about writing as a revelation of the divine in art persevered well into the century, shaping genres that simultaneously responded to growing interest in historicism and aesthetic ingenuity. I trace the adaptations that evolved in this context as contemporaries transformed mimetic fiction and autobiography—genres grounded in historical representation—into new forms with avowedly religious and even doctrinal ambitions: moral novels, tract tales, Christian best sellers, slave narratives, and didactic tales about slavery. Describing how these works converted the aesthetic form and historical matter of fiction and autobiography into vehicles for spiritual and moral ideals, my dissertation reveals the religious dimension of modern literature’s evolution in America.

In describing religion's importance to American literature, I characterize modernity as a site of epistemological contestation rather than religious recedence. Drawing on recent criticism that has broken with traditional secularization theory, which proposed the diminishment and privatization of religion as a feature of the modern era, my project understands modernity as a proliferation of epistemologies that spoke imperfectly to one another. Combining this definition with narrative theory, book history, and reader-response criticism, I describe the generic adaptations that marked religion's encounter with modern historicism and aesthetic theory. Chapters one and two argue that fiction was used for moral purposes, conceived as an alternative to doctrine, in the early national moral novel, and for evangelical ends in antebellum tract tales. In chapters three and four I explain how best selling Christian novels and slave narratives grappled with contemporary political problems, transforming history into an autonomous source of meaning rather than the sign of God's will. Describing antebellum literature's underappreciated literariness—its combination of the reflexive form and historical matter of modern literature with religious and moral ideas—my project illuminates modernity's complex debt not only to historicism and theories of aesthetics, but also to older and still influential ideas of incarnational art.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my director, Gregory S. Jackson, as well as the members of my committee: Cheryl A. Wall, Myra Jehlen, and Sarah Rivett. Many thanks also to my parents, Jeanne Bull and Kevin Howard, for their support during this process.

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## Introduction: The Form of Truth

Seven years before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was serialized in *The National Era*, Harriet Beecher Stowe submitted a review of contemporary popular literature to the *New York Evangelist* that argued against Dickens' moral usefulness. Though "he had a vein of original matter and imagery," his laudation as "a sort of literary Martin Luther" by the American public was, in her view, deeply misguided. Had they treated him simply as an "agreeing and amusing writer" who did no particular harm, the invidious confusion would have been avoided:

But when he was elevated to the rank of an instructive writer, and a profound moralist, our steady and reflective people began to put on their spectacles, and address themselves to look into the matter, and we are sorry to say that our agreeable friend "Boz" was as ill-fitted to bear a scrutiny of this kind, as most of his brethren in the fictitious line.<sup>1</sup>

His admirable qualities—an opposition to "meanness and oppression" and attention to the poor and neglected—do not make him a true moralist. Even Walter Scott, no more religious than Dickens, is better at portraying the faithful without ridicule "as he would any other phase of human nature"—a contrast to Dickens' drunken pontificators. Conceding that most "light literature" would be found wanting if tried by a "strictly religious standard," Stowe concludes that the prevailing question ought not to be "Who does the most good?" but "Who does the least harm?" Under this rubric Dickens would appear admirable—but only as an alternative to Bulwer or Sue.

Stowe's reference to a religious standard of reading suggests an analogous standard in writing. Yet isolating religious writing as a critical object in the period between the Revolution and the Civil War poses certain challenges given the ubiquity of religious and moral subjects across genres. Instead of identifying religious writing in

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, "Literary Epidemics.—No. 2," *New York Evangelist* 13 Jul. 1843, 14.

generic terms, however, it is possible to think about form or what happens when religious and moral subjects are developed in language. Read this way, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is comprehensible as a novel, evincing the historical detail and attention to psychological interiority characteristic of the genre, and as a prophetic argument against slavery, distinguishable from contemporary novels such as *The Scarlet Letter* (1851).<sup>2</sup> Religion in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an active force determining the shape of the narrative and its outcome—not simply a historical curiosity, as is Puritan theology in *The Scarlet Letter*. To get at the differences between these novels requires a description not of genre but of the evolutions in plot, characterization, and narrative rhetoric that produced two distinct worldviews—the prophetic and the historical.

Such description would address how *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, despite beginning with the same materials as any contemporary novel, arrives at visionary conclusions about contemporary history. Central to this narrative development is the character of Tom, who acquires nuance through experience only to lose his distinctive qualities toward the novel's close, becoming a type of Christ. Rather than eroding the possibility of allegory the body of the novel provides the material for its development: Tom is a Christ because,

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<sup>2</sup> On the novel see Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merin Press, 1962) and *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, and Gorki, and others*, trans. Edith Bone (London: Hillway Publishing Co., 1950); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957); Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990); Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3-40.



like Christ, he has had a historical life in the body of the novel.<sup>3</sup> The conclusion absorbs the preceding narrative and the history from which it draws into a cosmological scheme:

Both North and South have been guilty before God; and the *Christian church* has a heavy account to answer. Not by combining together, to protect injustice and cruelty, and making a common capital of sin is this union to be saved—but by repentance, justice, and mercy; for, not surer is the eternal law by which the millstone sinks in the ocean, than that stronger law by which injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God!<sup>4</sup>

It is possible to read this moment as a break with fiction that asserts history and external biblical verities over the world the novel has created. Yet it belongs to the structure of the novel as much as descriptions of Tom's spiritual struggles and St. Clair's regrets. Rather than breaking with fiction the lesson is where narrative leads. Key to understanding this pedagogical moment and the form of the novel is thus the relationship between idea and narrative—how a static principle can give rise to different narrative configurations that lead, despite their seeming spontaneity, to a fixed idea.

It is difficult to see this productive tension when genre categories or philosophical and historical movements are used to designate works as secular or modern at the expense of attention to how ideas work in language. I begin from the premise that antebellum literature was secular and modern not to redefine either term but to describe a trend of contemporary thinking in language about what it meant to be modern—whether the individual was truly self-sufficient and self-defining, the extent to which history could be trusted as an explanation of observable events, whether knowledge derived from experience, divine inspiration, or moral sensibility. Narrative form was a place to imagine different answers to these questions. We lose sight of the sense in which contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> On the relationship between fiction and Puritan allegory see McKeon, chapter eight and Leopold Damrosch, *God's Plot and Man's Stories: Studies in the Fictional Imagination from Milton and Fielding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1852), 322.

narrative tried ideas on for size even in the process of seeking to confirm them if we group works according to particular movements such as philosophy of sentiment or historicism without discussing the experimentation with ideas that happened at the level of language. For instance, the moral novels of the early national period have been claimed for the philosophy of sentiment as evidence of its secularizing influence on early American culture, yet this claim does little to explain the presence of religious ideas in moral novels or the structural relation moral philosophy retained to the religious thinking from which it departed.<sup>5</sup> Moral philosophy took its cue from religious discourse in seeking to perfect it, and contemporary moral and religious thought accordingly shared an investment in seeing the world as influenced by external laws and forces—God’s will or its modern alternative moral law.<sup>6</sup> The structural similarities between religious and moral thought created the context for a turn in the moral fiction of the early nineteenth century from less to more explicitly religious concerns—something we see in the transition from *The Coquette* (1797) to *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), for instance—which is obscured when moral fiction is understood strictly as a sign of secularization.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Mark A. Noll and E. Brooks Holifield have traced the impact of Scottish moral philosophy on the development of American religion in the first half of the nineteenth century. Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). See also David Walker Howe on Edwards’s adoption of Shaftesbury in *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> I use the term secularization rhetorically here to designate a diminishment in religious concerns, but I share with a growing body of scholarship an objection to this narrow definition. Instead, following José Casanova, Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, Michael Warner, and John Lardas Modern, I am interested in using the term to refer to the proliferation of options for belief and unbelief in modernity, the concurrent emergence of new conceptions of religion, ethics, and politics, and a “conceptual environment,” to borrow Modern’s theorization, in which religion becomes articulable as a matter of choice. See José Casanova,

If sentiment has reclaimed certain works as secular and modern, historicism has performed an analogous function, providing a means to distinguish representations of history from depictions of religious cosmologies or other temporal designs. Yet this distinction leaves out the many antebellum works that represented history as part of an eschatological frame. Again *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an instructive example given its preoccupation with contemporary history and Christian vision of God's will and judgment. Although its combination of history and prophecy was unprecedented in best-selling Christian novels to this point, the slave narratives from which Stowe borrowed had been applying a religious and moral vocabulary to the facts of history for some time. Slave narratives asked questions about history from a moral and religious perspective that had not yet been asked and, as narratives, they demonstrated what contemporary sermons and essays could not—the consequences of slavery and racial prejudice in lived experience. These narratives and the more self-consciously fictional works that followed—Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (1854)—instigated change in the representation of history from a religious or moral point of view in American letters. To claim these works solely for historical analysis ignores the lines of influence they imagined between history, providence, and moral law—their formulation of racial prejudice and slavery as historical problems with moral and religious consequences—as well as their role in changing the direction of moral and religious representation more broadly.<sup>8</sup>

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*Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, 2007); John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> For challenges to the longstanding critical narratives that have treated African-American Christianity as an apologetics for racism see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Joycelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions:*

The impulse to distinguish works with programmatic moral or religious ambitions from those that confirm recognizably modern habits of thought derives from a lingering skepticism about the effect of didacticism on writing. Lessons stymie writing, or so this skepticism maintains, forcing imaginative productions to conform to pre-existing ideas. Though all writing bears the mark of a structuring ideational framework, writing that deals with religious and moral issues is condemned because it neither claims nor aspires to be free—to imagine around the conditions of its production.<sup>9</sup> Yet the link between autonomy and literary merit is neither timeless nor self-evident. It looks particularly dubious in the light of early aesthetic theory, which conceived language and the arts more generally as mediating between the material and immaterial, history and ideals of justness, beauty, and truth, religious or moral.<sup>10</sup> And though the transcendent ambitions of sentimental and romantic aesthetics are routinely discussed as part of the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing, these concerns recede at the level of close reading. Instead, textual features that represent what we might call a modern epistemology take precedence: descriptive density is lauded as attention to historical nuance, historical relevance is praised as a rejection of idealization, and literary

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*Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Katherine Bassard, Yolanda Pierce, *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005). As Moody points out regarding the subjects of her study: “Clearly, for black holy women both the personal and the *spiritual* are political.” Moody, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has addressed this legacy in her work on sentimental aesthetics. Following Rancière in thinking about the force of the aesthetic as a dialectic between its resistance to constraint and its reforming imperative, she proposes the following with regard to sentimental representation: “Yet if following Rancière, we recognize the implausibility of the dream of the outside—even the extent to which this dream is always already embedded within the ideological space of the inside—then the heteronomous failures of the sentimental may look less like duplicity and more like the plausible means of playing through and giving scope to the inevitably interrelated spaces of inside and outside.” Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “Sentimental Aesthetics,” *American Literature* 76.3 (2004): 516-17.

<sup>10</sup> On the history of the term “aesthetic” in its earliest iterations see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) and Edward Cahill, *Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). On the emergence of literariness as a form of “demystified spirituality,” see McKeon, 120.

reflexivity is welcomed as a distinctly modern understanding of how language works.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the history of early aesthetic theory is the history of a developing modern epistemology; my point is that the transcendent impulse cannot be separated from that history or epistemology any more than certain textual features can be treated in isolation from the values of the moment that produced them.

In this sense we can think about interest in history as a modern value shared by antebellum writing while at the same time distinguishing between different types of historical representations and the values and interests they implied. Fiction is perhaps the best place to look for such differences since it claimed to resemble (rather than to document) history, making interpretation of the world an explicit part of its structure.<sup>12</sup> By fiction, I mean a narrative rendering of history that offered a particular account of the world. I use the term not as a means of distinguishing between genres but to describe what occurred within them.<sup>13</sup> For example, by discussing the fictional aspects of slave narratives I do not wish to challenge their claims to facticity, particularly since to do so would be to reproduce the structures of prejudice they originally encountered.<sup>14</sup> Instead, I

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<sup>11</sup> On this modern understanding of language and its relationship to rationalism see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Following Watt, McKeon connects the rise of the novel to discourses of philosophical realism. I use fiction in a related sense to discuss writing that was shaped by realism, but which extended beyond the genre of the novel.

<sup>13</sup> My definition is analogous to Dorrit Cohn's, who describes fiction as a "literary nonreferential narrative." Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). While I agree that "fiction itself creates the world to which it refers by referring to it," I remain convinced that its meaning derives from the fact that this created world is meant to be analogous to though not identical with an exterior world or standard of meaning.

<sup>14</sup> Slave narratives faced criticism from readers who questioned their facticity and thus the moral authority of the authors. See William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); James Olney, "'I was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20 (1984): 46-73. For a consideration of these issues in Harriet Jacobs' work specifically see Jacqueline Goldsby, "'I Disguised My Hand': Writing Versions of the Truth in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and John Jacobs's 'A True Tale of Slavery,'" in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, eds. Deborah Garfield and Rafia Zafar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 11-43. On the scandal concerning the factual content of James Williams's narrative and the reverberations

draw attention to the worlds they created in prose and the particular and often prophetic visions of history they offered. Similarly, by referring to evangelical tract tales as fictions I do not argue that these works were actually novels or that their producers were hypocrites, condemning novels and romances while turning out their own entertaining literature.<sup>15</sup> Fiction refers to the world the works I examine created and the orientation toward it they evinced. In works without religious investments this orientation might take the form of an inquiry into social dynamics or human motivations. In works with religious or moral preoccupations, however, fiction offered the chance to see beyond the world to universal laws or invisible powers of determination.

Early American fiction can thus be approached as a meditation on how and to what extent history mattered. To return to *The Scarlet Letter*—the novel inquires into the ways that Puritan theology shaped a moment in colonial history, taking a historical and psychological view of its religious subject. In describing Dimmesdale’s reading of the celestial A at the heart of the narrative, for example, the narrator presents a historical explanation: “Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances, and other natural phenomena, that occurred with less regularity than the rise

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of this debate for later works such as Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* see Ann Fabian, “Hannah Crafts, Novelist; or, How a Silent Observer Became a ‘Dabster at Invention,’” in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on the Bondwoman’s Narrative*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Hollis Robbins (New York: Perseus Books, 2004): 43-52. Teresa Goddu applies these issues to the gothic, noting the tension slave narrators negotiated in using gothic convention while maintaining a careful distinction between fact and fiction. Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> In the first edition of the *Christian Diadem and Family Keepsake*, a nondenominational annual, editor Zephaniah Paten Hatch claims: “But the fashionable works of novels and romances are not only to be found on the tables of the votaries of worldly pleasures, but alas! to the burning shame of many of the professed followers of Christ, be it said, that too often they are found in their dwellings also. To counteract the influences of these irreligious works, shall be, as it ever has been, our greatest and first object.” “Doing Good,” *Christian Diadem and Family Keepsake* IV.I (New York: Z. P. Hatch, 1854): 32. The *Diadem* went on to publish fiction by Harriet Beecher Stowe and others while maintaining a distinction typical in evangelical circles between these productions and novels and romances.

and set of sun and moon, as so many revelations from a supernatural source.”<sup>16</sup> Puritan cosmology shapes the characters’ world without influencing the novel’s explanatory structure, which returns events to historical and psychological causes. To the question of what determines human life the novel thus makes a definitive answer grounded in history and society.

*Moby-Dick* (1851) offers an answer that is closer to the metaphysical concerns of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The white whale is a mystery and the question of whether we can know what lies on the other side of the mask remains open. Thus Ahab rails: “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.”<sup>17</sup> Yet the effect of “that inscrutable thing” on Ahab and Ishmael is chronicled with an eye for life-like detail and psychological nuance similar to that in *The Scarlet Letter*. Though the novel asks metaphysical questions it confines its answers to observable phenomena, making its structuring reality historical rather than purely metaphysical.

How different the conclusions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Its characters are also shaped by social circumstance to become indifferent to slavery and accustomed to violence, yet the novel explains these effects as spiritual—the results of human sinfulness—placing them in an eschatological frame. Or consider an evangelical tract such as Helen Cross Knight’s *Robert Dawson; or, The Brave Spirit* (1846), which chronicles the development of its central character in the recognizable world of antebellum New England only to reveal in its conclusion that this small history of failures and triumphs in the life of a young boy is an example of precepts codified in the Bible.

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<sup>16</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: Samuel E. Cassino, 1892), 275.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, The White Whale* (Boston: St. Botolph Society, 1892), 157.

The effect of history and social setting is definitive, shaping Robert's development to manhood, but there is a larger reality at work that the tract seeks to argue using his history as an example. The analogies between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Robert Dawson* and other contemporary fiction are worth considering but the differences that emerged in these works as a function of plot and narrative rhetoric point to a vein of thinking that occupied the form of contemporary fiction for ends that did not confirm secular modernity but reflected its chief premises back as open questions.

Because this vein of thinking was concerned with fixed principles or lessons it is tempting to think it produced uniform results, but the process of working these ideas out in fiction produced novels, tales, and autobiographies that little resembled one another. The novels of the early national period, for example, emphasized a variety of moral problems from gaming to vanity to the potential threat of personal autonomy, particularly for women. Their exhortatory emphases differed, with novels such as *The Coquette* leaving readers to judge whether Eliza's willfulness was to blame for her unhappiness, and others such as Frances Jacson's *Rhoda* (1816) volunteering maxims to caution readers about worldly accolades. Although they approached the subject of moral conduct from different positions, these novels focused on descriptions of social life in an effort to redeem the status of the novel in a period when its value was increasingly a function of how accurately it depicted experience. They also varied in how often they returned representations of life to religious matters, with some works emphasizing a divine creator and the rewards of the hereafter and others limiting discussion to social behavior. As the fictional landscape changed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, moral novels lost popular precedence and were joined by a range of works that treated history less as a



sphere in which moral truisms were played out and more as a phenomenon in its own right. Representing history's moral significance then fell to a different set of works—popular religious ephemera and best-selling Christian novels—with distinctly biblical and devotional commitments. From the moral novel's emphasis on the world, the representation of moral and religious issues became more metaphysically oriented in works such as tract tales and best-selling Christian novels as the century progressed and the field for fiction widened.

At the same time, representing history from a moral or religious perspective in fiction eventually changed history's significance. From something that needed to be penetrated in tract tales and the earliest Christian blockbusters history became a record of divine intention in later Christian novels and slave narratives. In other words, the emphasis shifted from imagining an otherworldly sphere of influence behind history to a conviction that history was where God's will manifested and moral precepts were confirmed. This attitude intensified as the country approached war. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* represents this transition, insisting that something greater than history would avenge the nation's wrongs and also pointing to history as the space in which America's sins and divine justice would unfold. In this way it was typical of the larger conversation about slavery into which it entered. Both pro- and anti-slavery advocates invoked biblical sources in their defense, collapsing the distinction between divine intention and worldly matters such as policy-making and armed confrontation.<sup>18</sup> The moral dimension of the conflict hinged on the question of history's final cause—was it the result of social and political factors, the product of a governing vision, or the reflection of universal

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<sup>18</sup> See Noll section V for a discussion of the role biblical literalism played in the evolution of the conflict. On religion and the Civil War more generally see Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Regan Williams, eds., *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

principles? Slave narratives turned the question of meaning back to the facts of history, citing observable facts as proof of slavery's moral iniquity and provoking a larger turn in American letters to thinking about history as the space where divine will and moral meaning would become evident.<sup>19</sup> These narratives thought harder about history out of necessity—the necessity created by racial prejudice as a historical phenomenon—and the reckoning they instigated with facts produced a turn in religious and moral representation that the close of the War confirmed. Though the urgency of the narratives' political project would be lost in historical Christian fiction such as *Ben-Hur* (1880) and retained in the uplift tradition, the field of postbellum religious and moral representation would be shaped by the slave narratives' emphasis on history as something to be dealt with rather than got around.

The trajectory from the moral novels of the early nation to *Ben-Hur* and *Iola Leroy* (1892) reveals the unpredictable turns that fictional representation of religious and moral ideas could take. This unpredictability derived from the ongoing tension between narrative and idea. Ideas could pull at narrative form, returning new developments to pre-established patterns, but narrative could also serve to support and reveal fixed principles. For instance, Tom's transformation into a modern Christ at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* along with Stowe's account of the novel's origins seem to confirm a reading in which the narrative's developing aspects are held in check by a governing idea. Claiming to be inspired by a vision of Tom's final beating at Legree's hands, Stowe maintained that this

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<sup>19</sup> Augusta Rhorbach makes a similar point in connecting the rise of realism in America to anti-slavery discourse, though she does not connect this discourse to the forms of religious and moral rhetoric from which I am arguing it evolved. Augusta Rhorbach, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Race, Realism, and the U.S. Literary Marketplace* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

initial view and the writing of the novel were “imposed” upon her from without.<sup>20</sup> Yet another reading of the novel is possible in which its narrative progress is the matter of its lesson. Thus when George Shelby admonishes his newly freed slaves to think about Tom’s cabin and attempt to follow in his steps, he invokes the content of the novel—Tom’s life as a historical character—instead of an abstraction. The novel’s argument against slavery and its insistence that readers “feel right” depended on the presentation of characters and situations provocative of feeling—the material of the novel.<sup>21</sup>

The history of the fictional representation of religious and moral principles in early American letters is then the history of this belief: the conviction that language serves a unique function as a vehicle for ideas. The idea predated the period I discuss, but it received new force here from contemporary intellectual currents. Beginning as the Reformed revision of traditional Christian notions of incarnational art—art that embodies divinity—it was formalized in the precept of *sola scriptura*, or the idea of language as privileged vehicle of the spirit.<sup>22</sup> Language acquired a strange freedom as a product of its elevated status, adopting new forms that made Protestantism “a religion of the book.”<sup>23</sup> In the colonial context this freedom became what critics from Charles Feidelson to Sacvan Bercovitch have described as the symbolic mode of discourse that characterized colonial

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<sup>20</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, introduction, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1878), xi.

<sup>21</sup> “But, what can any individual do? Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*.” Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 317.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the transition to language as privileged vehicle of the spirit and away from older forms of sacral invocation such as communal performance see Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> See Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jean-Francois Gilmont, “Protestant Reformations and Reading,” in *A History of Reading in the West*, Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999): 213-238.

Puritan representation.<sup>24</sup> Words for the Puritans were capable of diverse expression because they were constrained in what they could represent by their fidelity to a finite truth, codified in the teachings of scripture.<sup>25</sup> Though truth was understood as limited, its expression could take many shapes and it was in these forms that Puritans gloried, seeing them as manifestations of divine inspiration.<sup>26</sup> Perry Miller puts it somewhat differently in his description of the Puritan Ramist argument: “The argument was the thing, or the name of the thing, or the mental conception of the thing, all at once.”<sup>27</sup> The idea that words could vary because language was determined by a fixed standard of meaning fostered a type of formal awareness, though not the kind that would be possible with the advent of later theories of aesthetics. Instead a Puritan poetics would shape religious and moral representation in the American context as an ambition to use language to express ideas about the meaning of observable events and unseen truths.

The importation of Scottish philosophy of sentiment into the American context in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries extended and revised these ideas by introducing a vocabulary for discussing artistic representation as a moral rather than doctrinal or devotional matter. Sentiment was an alternative to theology—a science of

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<sup>24</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); and introduction, *The Puritan Imagination: essays in revaluation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

<sup>25</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch describes the unity at the heart of Puritan representation as follows: “Their belief in ‘spiritual signification’ opened out into a richly symbolic mode of discourse. They conceived of reality, in accordance with their concept of the unity of knowledge, as a system of linked analogies, interlacing every strand of recorded experience, ancient and modern, scientific and humanistic no less than theological. And within that system, they understood their own enterprise, the momentous ‘errand’ they never wearied of describing, as part of the cosmic drama of redemption.” Bercovitch, *Puritan Imagination* 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ann Kibbey has detailed Puritans’ appreciation of the material and figurative properties of language, yet she claims this sensibility derived not from a conviction in a stable order of reference but from a sense that meaning inhered in the rhetorical play of language itself. Ann Kibbey, *The interpretation of material shapes in Puritanism: A study of rhetoric, prejudice, and violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939), 149.

morals derived from contemporary empiricism and rationalism.<sup>28</sup> Figures such as Thomas Reid and Francis Hutcheson worked from within a tradition of thinking about empirical knowledge, proposing that knowledge derived not only from experience but also from an inherent moral sense and the simple ideas provided by the Bible.<sup>29</sup> In amending the empiricist impulse to make the world the only source of knowledge, philosophy of sentiment shared investments with contemporary religious thinking that aimed to accord the new science of experience with theology, circumventing the threat of moral relativism Locke and Hume seemed to pose.<sup>30</sup> Major studies of sentiment have tended to stress its synonymy with religion or its break with religious ideas.<sup>31</sup> Instead, it is important to recognize the common intellectual field that sentimental philosophy shared with religious discourse. While the former was concerned with restoring absolute standards of right to Enlightenment theories of knowledge, the latter was interested in using empiricism to enhance the relevance of religious belief during a period in which its cultural status was

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<sup>28</sup> Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, introduction, *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7, 14-16; Jonathan I. Isreal, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of America 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67; Peter Gay, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 3-24, 149, 179

<sup>29</sup> Holifield, 176; Noll, 234; Fliegelman, 36.

<sup>30</sup> On Jonathan Edwards's familiarity with John Locke see Perry Miller, "Edwards, Locke, and the Rhetoric of Sensation," *Perspectives of Criticism*, Harry Levin, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950): 103-124; Laurence, David, "Jonathan Edwards, John Locke, and the Canon of Experience," *Early American Literature* 15 (1980): 107-123; and Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), particularly chapter one. For an account of empiricism in colonial religious thought see Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> For the first type of argument see Jane Tompkins, *The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-70* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); and Gregg Camfield, "The Moral Aesthetics of Sentimentality: A Missing Key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 43.3 (1988): 319-345. Work that has stressed the break between sentimental philosophy and religious ideas includes Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

changing.<sup>32</sup> In the field of early American letters, the reciprocal relationship between sentiment and religion fostered a general openness toward morally useful fiction, initially embodied in the novels of the early national period.<sup>33</sup>

Despite their structural similarities, contemporary morality and religious thinking were not identical. A few broad generalizations are possible. Morality focused on the world rather than the world beyond, delineating social problems and theorizing the public and private dimensions of virtue.<sup>34</sup> The moral novels of the early national period, for instance, focused on the social consequences of decision-making and the happiness or unhappiness of primary characters, which derived from how closely they adhered to standards of moral behavior. Though some novels referred to religious ideas, including notions of afterlife and divine providence, these references were extraneous to the novels' predominate moral logic. Biblical ideas were framed as the source of moral precepts, but these precepts were understood as the translation of biblical materials into a broad and nonsectarian language applicable to the present.

Morality figured in all of the works I discuss yet moral concerns were uppermost in some works while others turned to devotional and biblical points. With a sense of morality's genetic relation to contemporary religion—its expunging of doctrine's controversial aspects—it is possible to understand the common presence of both moral and religious concerns in early American literature. Morality's secularizing tendency was not a denial of religion as much as it was part of a contemporary effort to think about the

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<sup>32</sup> On the significance of disestablishment for American religion see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), particularly chapter nine.

<sup>33</sup> Thus, along with Gregg Camfield, I disagree with Terence Martin's argument that Scottish philosophy created a climate suspicious of fiction. Terence Martin, *The Instructive Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961)

<sup>34</sup> Isreal, 67-8.

relation between ideals and historical facts. That some works tended toward moral emphases while others imagined scenes of eschatological significance is further evidence that moral and religious concerns were not mutually exclusive or determinative of what occurred in fiction.

If morality extended through the period's fiction as a formative influence so too did romantic thinking about aesthetics. A rebellion against the perceived sterility of Enlightenment aesthetic theory, including discourses of moral sentiment, romanticism was an attempt to restore revelation to art without the insistence on the supernatural that defined older devotional forms. According to M.H. Abrams, romantic thought reformulated the categories of traditional theology—God/man, nature/God—into “naturalized” dualities: man/nature, subject/object.<sup>35</sup> Thus in place of spiritual regeneration romanticism lauded self-articulation, a process of maturation whose endpoint was experience and a deeper level of self-understanding rather than union with a divine power.<sup>36</sup> Art was no longer a tool for spiritual transcendence, raising the thoughts of the reader or viewer to divine matters; instead, it was a record of and a tool for the subject's process of self-discovery.

In the American context romantic theories of art revitalized a Puritan poetics adapted to eighteenth-century empiricism by reintroducing a metaphysical element. Romanticism's most striking addition to Puritan literary creativity was the figure of the author as visionary, yet in the American context this change was mitigated by a continued emphasis on an order of meaning larger than the individual. As Charles Taylor points out,

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<sup>35</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Abrams, 187-88.

romantic notions of the sublime—the idea of something larger than historical or social forces—replaced an older sense of connection to the divine:

The sense of depth cannot be found in an eternity which is no longer a felt reality. It is now found in the vastness of space and the abyss of time. It is no longer unproblematic to find the more-than-human in God, but it shows up in the frightening otherness of huge mountains and raging torrents.<sup>37</sup>

This shift to locating transcendent meaning in nature, evolutionary time, and artistic expression influenced romanticism on both sides of the Atlantic, but according to Charles Feidelson American romanticism was less attentive to the significance of the author than its European counterpart and more interested in the meaning-making capacity of language itself.<sup>38</sup> Loosed from its association with the individual, language appeared to American romantics inherently symbolic, autonomous from the author and the world of things and creative of meaning.<sup>39</sup> The symbol seemingly united subject and object in the moment of perception, which Paul De Man has argued offered the promise of transcendence from what he calls our “authentically temporal predicament.”<sup>40</sup> This transcendence has the implied association (or taint, for De Man) of a return to a religious temporality that is layered and punctured by moments of revelatory simultaneity.<sup>41</sup> Rather than taking up the question of whether romantic symbolism denied history, it is possible to identify the opportunities it offered fictional works that explored history’s proportions

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<sup>37</sup> Taylor *Secular Age*, 343.

<sup>38</sup> Feidelson, 56. For more on the consequences of romantic thought for artistic representation see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), particularly section V.

<sup>39</sup> Feidelson, 49; Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 12, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Paul De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 208.

<sup>41</sup> As Gregory S. Jackson notes, in a Christian hermeneutic “sacred events were understood as distinct from secular history, occurring and recurring in sacred patterns understood through a rich typological tradition.” Jackson, 228. Hence symbols for the Puritans demonstrated the simultaneity of history and preordained patterns of human progress. Feidelson, 78.



and relations to other modes of conceiving time and meaning. The visionary mode of representing time evident in fiction influenced by American romanticism was thus the continuation of a Puritan poetics that viewed language as a means for seeing beyond the perceptual limits of daily experience to the larger influences shaping human life.

Romantic ideas also influenced contemporary historical thinking. Nineteenth-century historicism differed from older, stadial models of human progress by recognizing the diversity and asynchronous nature of development across cultures as well as the role language played in the creation of history.<sup>42</sup> Writing, particularly fiction, acquired new status in this context, becoming increasingly realistic as the century progressed.<sup>43</sup> Yet romantic historicism was interested not only in realist representation, but also in the universal, supraempirical patterns that linked different cultures. The preeminent fictional expression of this worldview, the historical romance, thus combined representations of the familiar matter of contemporary history with what George Dekker has termed the “strange” idea of transcendent patterns to produce “experience liberated”: depictions that made claims to universality and historical “relentlessness.”<sup>44</sup> Although it rejected metaphysics, romantic historical thought relied on a notion of *vraisemblance*, to borrow Perry Miller’s term—the idea of correspondence between historical representation, facts in nature, and truth.<sup>45</sup> As Michael Davitt Bell puts it, romance was a historical

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<sup>42</sup> Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xvi.

<sup>44</sup> George Dekker, *The American Historical Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 24-26.

<sup>45</sup> Perry Miller, “The Romance and the Novel,” in *Nature’s Nation* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 260.

representational mode whose reality “just happened, luckily, to be ‘poetic’ or ‘romantic.’”<sup>46</sup>

These “poetic” notions of history had their roots in religious thought and for this reason historical and religious ideas often featured together in the contemporary fiction. M.H. Abrams has described romanticism’s rebellion against the “decorum” of Enlightenment thought and its search for a return to the “stark drama and suprarational mysteries of the Christian story and doctrines and to the violent conflicts and abrupt reversals of the Christian inner life, turning on the extremes of destruction and creation.”<sup>47</sup> Reading time as cyclical and determined by supraempirical patterns, romantic historicism reasserted key features of Christian typology. Hence religious and historical concerns featured in contemporary fiction without a sense of contradiction. For example, when Meville’s *Pierre* challenges the universe he engages in activity with cosmological implications, and when New England and Scottish cultures are discussed for their differences in *The Wide, Wide World* the historicist idea of simultaneous but distinct cultural development informs a religious reading of national character.

Another development that informed the contemporary relationship between history and religion was the higher criticism, which created a favorable context for figurative expressions of biblical ideas. Though symbolic understandings of biblical language were ancient, during the Renaissance and Reformation a literal, historical hermeneutics had predominated.<sup>48</sup> As Hans Frei has explained, this interpretive practice involved seeing events in the Bible as literally real and part of a unified temporality.

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of the American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 15.

<sup>47</sup> Abrams, 66.

<sup>48</sup> Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America 1800-1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 4.

Figurative readings of the Bible were not possible in this context since the realism of the biblical text was “at once literal and historical, and not only doctrinal or edifying.”<sup>49</sup> With the rise of Enlightenment discourses of historical progress it became possible to imagine the events of the Bible as verifiable in different ways, through eschatological and historical frameworks. Yet a historical biblical hermeneutics also fostered dispute since certain events in the text could not be verified as factually accurate.<sup>50</sup> The idea of figurative meaning addressed this issue, making the Bible’s value a function of how it expressed truth in writing.<sup>51</sup> Not only were historically questionable moments in the Bible reclaimed, language was also conceived as a pedagogical tool in its own right.

The openness to figurative language that higher criticism encouraged extended to representations of biblical truths.<sup>52</sup> Higher criticism made its way from Germany to America in the early nineteenth century, exerting influence less at the level of scholarly study and more at the level of creating a field of permissibility for anecdotes and stories in sermons, biographical renditions of the life of Jesus, and tract tales and religious novels.<sup>53</sup> As Candy Gunther Brown has explained, antebellum evangelicals envisioned their extra-biblical works as participating in the same pedagogical project as the Bible, an attitude that reflected a growing appreciation of the pedagogical dimensions of figurative

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<sup>49</sup> Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 1.

<sup>50</sup> Frei, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Frei, 119; Isreal, 222, 466.

<sup>52</sup> On the influence of higher criticism in the development of Unitarianism and the Social Gospel movement, see Jackson, 176-181. On liberal Christianity’s influence on the development of American fiction see Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Buell describes the higher criticism’s impact on contemporary belles lettres as follows: “Secular literature acquired greater spiritual legitimacy as the propagation of religion came to be seen as dependent upon verbal artistry and as the record of revelation itself was seen to be a verbal artifact.” Buell, 168.

<sup>53</sup> David S. Reynolds, “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America,” *American Quarterly* 32.5 (1980): 478-89. On the role of evangelical tracts in revolutionizing antebellum print production see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

or creative language.<sup>54</sup> Thus fiction's increasingly accepted place in contemporary culture was guaranteed as much by the infiltration of historical empiricism into contemporary biblical hermeneutics as by developments in romantic and sentimental aesthetics and theories of history.

I trace how religious and moral concerns developed in early American fiction by following structural affinities that extended from the early national moral novel to uplift fiction and historical Christian best sellers such as *Ben-Hur*. I begin with moral novels, grounded as they were in Enlightenment theories of social behavior that located universal truth in human dignity, citizenship, and public discourse rather than in theology, yet I argue in the first section of my discussion for the influence these novels exerted on new forms of evangelical fiction. Describing the British and American novels read in the city during the early national years, chapter one claims that works such as Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy* (1812) and James Fenimore Cooper's *Precaution* (1820) used fiction to represent the necessity of virtuous behavior in the modern world, making narrative invention a tool for truth claims based in a standard of moral law external to the text. Though these novels were not doctrinal they forged a connection between invented worlds and moral order that reproduced the Platonism inherent in contemporary Protestantism, paving the way for new evangelical works.

Indicating that fiction and virtue were complementary rather than antithetical, moral novels prompted evangelicals to experiment with what fictional narratives could do for religion, and chapter two outlines the early antebellum boom in the production of ephemeral tract tales—short pamphlets circulated by evangelical organizations such as

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<sup>54</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8.

the American Sunday School Union and the American Tract Society that used fictional plots to craft worlds that evidenced divine truths in their unfolding. Tracts encouraged identification with a social position in history and a spiritual position in the larger eschatological order to which history belonged. To read the tracts was thus to conceive identity as both historical and religious, a form of belonging with political consequences that the chapter traces through the tales circulated by the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia.

Tract tales inspired the best-selling novels of the century, and chapter three describes how works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Wide, Wide World* made complex and historically- detailed plots into arguments for biblical precepts. This adaptation of religious principle to historical representation encountered resistance from a burgeoning contemporary historicism, which resisted the idea that history was part of a Christian cosmology. Controversy over *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* facticity represented the conflict between these worldviews: using fiction to depict the historical facts of slavery from a spiritual perspective, the novel was at once the most popular work of its day and a site of conflict for readers who no longer believed that historical facts were interpretable through a religious schema.

Stowe's innovation had been anticipated by decades, however, by writers such as Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, Moses Roper, and James Pennington, who used creative representation in their narratives to address slavery's moral meaning as a historical fact. Chapter four demonstrates how their work preserved the ideological structure of earlier religious and moral writing while changing the meaning and importance of history. Moving from traditional to fictionalized slave narratives, and

ending with Frances E.W. Harper's reinvention of the evangelical tale as racial uplift fiction, the project concludes that by reading God's purposes in history's progress, postbellum religious and moral writing would transform history into an autonomous source of meaning rather than the sign of a truth elsewhere.

To describe the fictional representation of religious and moral ideas in early American fiction means identifying an overlooked dimension of works that have been fit into or absented from a critical narrative of modern American literature's development. I do not wish to maintain that all early American fiction was actually "religious" or that the dimension of American fiction I discuss reflected an unstable sense of modernity or secularity.<sup>55</sup> Instead, I want to stress the mechanics of proximity—the way that different ideas and conclusions developed within the capacious form of modern fiction. These developments suggest that periodization and the intellectual history of genre—its symbolization of modernity or secularity—must be tempered by a recognition that what happens at the level of language cannot be forcibly returned to an idea, even if (and perhaps most notably when) a fixed idea is what prompts linguistic expression in the first place.

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<sup>55</sup> Modern, 47.

## Chapter One: The Experiment of the Early National Moral Novel

Lady Delacour, mentor to the titular heroine of Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda* (1801), has a habit of ironic self-scrutiny that appears out of place in a work with didactic ambitions. Describing her life to her young charge, she uses a series of antitheses that reveal the novel's moral project:

I am no hypocrite, and have nothing worse than folly to conceal. That's bad enough—for a woman who is known to play the fool, is always suspected of playing the devil. But I begin where I ought to end, with my moral, which I dare say you are not impatient to anticipate—I never read or listened to a moral at the end of a story in my life—manners for me, and morals for those that like them. My dear, you will be woefully disappointed, if in my story you expect anything like a novel.<sup>1</sup>

In claiming that her life is unfit for moral or novel Lady Delacour links the two to affirm *Belinda's* ambitions, albeit sardonically. The reader has already witnessed Belinda's judgment of her mentor's conduct and determination to avoid her ladyship's past mistakes (B15); Lady Delacour's speech thus confirms her role as negative example in the moral economy of the novel. Its irony also solidifies *Belinda's* generic status as a novel with didactic ambitions. And though the combination of irony, novelistic representation, and moral didacticism might appear incongruous, these narrative elements place the novel in a recognizable group of works that dominated the late- eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century transatlantic print markets.

Despite moral novels' contemporary ubiquity in print they call into question assumptions central to theories of the novel. Primary among these is Ian Watt's argument that the novel arose from a turn to philosophical rationalism, historical empiricism, and

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35-6. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

psychological realism and a concurrent rejection of moral and religious universals.<sup>2</sup> The novel's distinguishing feature—the world it builds through “history-like” detail—has been framed as the manifestation of philosophical trends that overturned religious and moral ideology.<sup>3</sup> More recent scholarship on sentimental novels in early America has continued in this vein by treating sentimental philosophy as a break with religious tradition.<sup>4</sup> Yet this emphasis risks overlooking what is most useful about early moral novels. Novels in the sense Watt and others have described and also invested in moral and religious claims, these works offer critics a perspective on the secularization of American literature. Moral novels reveal the role fiction played during this period as a space for imagining the relationship between transcendent moral and religious ideals and historical observation as these modes of thinking shifted in their relation to one another and relative cultural importance.

The novels I will discuss belonged to a flourishing scene of literary production in one of the nation's early print capitals, Philadelphia, and to a transatlantic tradition of moral writing. British and American, these novels belong together because they were read together; I will therefore avoid searching for narrative traits that distinguish one nation's prose from another's. Instead I will argue that early national moral novels form a

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Michael McKeon uses the term “history-like” to describe how realist fiction was understood once it was possible to conceive of its value as something other than historical facticity: “Realism validates literary creation for being not history but history-like, ‘true’ to the only external reality that still makes a difference, but also sufficiently apart from it (hence, ‘probable’ and ‘universal’) to be true to itself as well. The idea of realism exists to concede the accountability of art to a prior reality, without seeming to compromise the uniquely modern belief that such reality as it is answerable to already is internalized in the art itself as a demystified species of spirituality.” Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 120.

<sup>4</sup> Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).



comprehensive unit of analysis as the material available to American readers at a particular point in time and as a body of work with shared formal strategies, epistemological investments, and thematic preoccupations. These textual elements offer a strategy for reconsidering the early American novel. Early national moral novels evidence the cultural continuities between American and British writing in the post-Revolutionary period while also providing a perspective on issues that have been central to the analysis of early American novels: the virtues of autonomy and the demands of the public good.<sup>5</sup> Most significantly, these novels reveal the centrality of moral and religious concerns to novelistic experiments on both sides of the Atlantic during this period.

I focus on the universalizing imperative in early national moral fiction because it enabled the development of later prose narratives with more robust moral and devotional concerns.<sup>6</sup> This historical trajectory works against a theory of literary secularization as the process by which fiction becomes increasingly true to history and consciously belletristic as its religious and moral concerns diminish. Accordingly, I want to stress the continuities between moral ideology and older structures of religious thinking. Although eighteenth-century moral philosophy represented a self-conscious departure from theology and governmental religion, it also celebrated an idea of universal truth derived

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<sup>5</sup> On transatlantic continuities see Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature in the British Diaspora, 1750-1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). On the tensions between emergent strands of liberal individualism and ideals of republican collectivity see David Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Barnes, xi; Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8-9; Knott.

<sup>6</sup> On the persistent “gap” in literary studies between analysis of the fiction of the 1790s and the later flourishing of the American Renaissance see Paul Gilmore, “John Neal, American Romance, and International Romanticism,” *American Literature* 84.3 (2012): 477-504; Sandra Gustafson, “Histories of Democracy and Empire,” *American Quarterly* 59.1 (2007): 107-133.

from religious thinking.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary moral philosophy and theology were also linked by a concern with how universal standards of behavior and belief related to particular historical and social circumstances. Critical conversations about the early national novel have traced this concern in discussions of virtue, autonomy, and civic responsibility. Yet these issues are rarely placed in the larger philosophical context defined by the negotiation between ideals and material circumstances that made moral and devotional writing popular as well.<sup>8</sup>

Early national moral novels were thus experiments with resolving didactic imperatives and specific cases. Their critical classification has been challenging since they embody the characteristics associated with novelistic fiction—“history-like” details, irony, and reflexive gestures to their own narrative activity—while insisting on moral lessons. Characters in these novels embodied a range of subject positions whose variety was a mark of realist ambitions. Virtue was often the result of internal struggle with questions of how far the will could guide before it became a danger. By framing virtue as part of a set of contemporary concerns about autonomy, social obligation, and religious and moral duty, moral novels developed a particular type of novelistic realism.

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<sup>7</sup> On the development of eighteenth-century moral ideology as a “science of ideas” that could replace religion see Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, introduction, *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7-8, 16. On the “moral vision” at the heart of Enlightenment realism, see Peter Gay, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 179. On the evolution of morality as a way of discussing the collective good without recourse to received religion see Jonathan I. Isreal, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67.

<sup>8</sup> Cathy Davidson discusses the function of virtue in the early American novel as the balance of a tension between individual desire and public good in *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Edward Cahill discusses how virtue, pleasure, and liberty were connected in early American aesthetic discourse, which functioned “as a means of comprehending the pressures of revolution, constitution-making, and nation-formation, the conflicts of class, race, and gender, and the vicissitudes of political life in a republic.” Edward Cahill, *Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 5. On the theme of autonomy in early American literature see Davidson; Barnes; Cahill; Brown; Knott; and Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Additionally, they used other aspects of prose narrative such as dialogue and the revelation of information in plot to reflect on the act of moralizing and the limits of virtue. By combining questions of experience, knowledge, and virtue, moral novels represented how universal standards of rectitude functioned in a modern landscape.

These epistemological investments lose any potential sense of contradiction when positioned in a critical frame that reads late-eighteenth-century moral philosophy, rationalism, and empiricism as homologous discourses. Charles Taylor's work has revealed how secular humanism evolved out of intellectual efforts—including moral philosophy—and lived practices that related events in the world to a transcendent order of meaning.<sup>9</sup> In reconciling these categories, increasingly understood to be irreconcilable, moral philosophy thus belonged to the “grammar of concepts” Talal Asad has connected to the institutionalization of secularism.<sup>10</sup> Men such as Archibald Alison, Thomas Reid, and Francis Hutcheson understood themselves to be part of a contemporary conversation about epistemology and evidence—the matter of the world—but they disputed Locke and Hume on the grounds of moral relativism by refusing to make experience the only standard for what could be known or believed.<sup>11</sup> They proposed an alternative standard of moral rectitude that tied empirical observation to a universal law. Thus what moral philosophy attempted at the level of theory moral novels sought to accomplish in practice by placing observable phenomena in an articulated moral framework.

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16, 25.

<sup>11</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 176; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 234; Fliegelman, 23-24.

The primary strain of moral philosophy in the new nation was Scottish and it had a catalytic effect on novel production, a fact that critics are only beginning to recognize.<sup>12</sup> Though the Scots did not place the same value on the autonomy of art as Kant or Schiller, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has pointed that both German idealism and Scottish sentimental philosophy articulated the interplay between imagination and universal law. A treatise such as Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790) related aesthetics to universal benevolence and sympathy (rather than autonomy), but it shared with German criticism a value for how art transported readers, listeners, or viewers beyond themselves in the consideration of something universal.<sup>13</sup> As novels increased in popularity, Scottish philosophers such as Hugh Blair and Alison became interested in their potential.<sup>14</sup> Gregg Camfield has noted that Blair and Alison appreciated how novels drew upon the pleasures of the senses and the imagination to inculcate moral principles.<sup>15</sup> Part of the early national moral novel's history in America was thus the positive climate Scottish philosophy created for fiction.

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<sup>12</sup> Terence Martin's work *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961) forcefully denied this relationship, and Cathy Davidson also cited Scottish suspicion of fiction in *Revolution and the Word*. For a useful challenge to this argument see Fliegelman, 36 and Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Sentimental Aesthetics," *American Literature* 76.3 (2004): 508.

<sup>14</sup> See chapter two for a discussion of Blair on the value of novels.

<sup>15</sup> Gregg Camfield, "The Moral Aesthetics of Sentimentality: A Missing Key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 43.3 (1988): 330. Davidson notes that Scottish opinion of fiction did remain suspicious in certain quarters. Though Blair wrote in support of "fictitious histories" in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), a work that was widely circulated in universities, William Smith at the College of Philadelphia, John Witherspoon at Princeton, and Thomas Clapp and Ezra Stiles at Yale remained hesitant to embrace fiction as a pedagogical vehicle. Davidson, 49. On Blair's significance to American universities see Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 169; Warren Guthrie, "The Development of Rhetorical Theory in America, 1635-1850," *Speech Monographs* 15.1 (1948): 61-71; David Lundberg and Henry F. May, "The Enlightened Reader in America," *American Quarterly* 28.2 (1976): 262-293; and Cahill, 26.

Despite being grounded in discourses whose credibility was not doubted—Lockean empiricism and Scottish sentiment—the early national moral novel occupied a tenuous cultural position in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nina Baym has claimed that competing definitions of the novel persisted into the antebellum period, an uncertainty reflected in dialogue about novels and novel writing. For instance, in his preface to *The Asylum; or, Alonzo and Melissa* (1811), Isaac Mitchell notes the dangers that novels, particularly those dealing with seduction, pose to the reader. Works such as Rousseau's *Julie* (1781) inculcated harm by presenting evil actions in the guise of natural behavior, making them seem unremarkable. Although virtuous fiction was not unheard of—he cites works by Charlotte Smith, Frances Sheridan, and Sydney Owenson in England, and Charles Brockden Brown and Carolina Matilda Thayer in America—the “reputation of the sentimental story” was in need of refurbishment as it had been “tarnished, not by integral defect, or constitutional depravity, but by a deviation, like the true church, from its original, correct, and orthodox standard.”<sup>16</sup> Mitchell's comments suggest a conservatism at work in contemporary thinking about the novel that sought to defend its uncertain place in the cultural landscape. This commentary contradicts Cathy Davidson's theory that the novel was viewed exclusively as the proponent of change and critique.<sup>17</sup> Instead it evinces the early American novel's immersion in discussions about the compatibility of old and new ideas—moral and religious principles and theories of historical empiricism.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentators and authors disagreed with each other and among themselves about the moral novel's virtues and vices, though they

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<sup>16</sup> Isaac Mitchell, Preface, *The Asylum; or, Alonzo and Melissa. An American Tale Founded on Fact* (Poughkeepsie: Joseph Nelson, C.C. Adams and Co., 1811), xxi.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, 40.

were united in their understanding of what the genre was attempting to do.<sup>18</sup> The central question in these discussions was whether a novel could unite moral aims with entertaining and social relevant content in a way that was persuasive rather than forced. For example, the hero of Hannah More's *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* (1808) reflects on the status of the work as a novel—a question that would have been pressing to readers of More's popular and pious Cheap Repository Tracts: "The novel-reader will reject it as dull; the religious may throw it aside as frivolous; the one will accuse it of excessive strictness; the other of censurable levity."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, when authors adhered to a legible moral design their works frequently encountered censure. Mary Brunton was often singled out in this regard; about her second novel *Discipline* (1814), an anonymous reviewer from the Philadelphia-based *Atkinson's Casket* argues:

We can forgive the egotistical display of self vanity she makes use of in the first vol. in the consideration of the purely moral tendency contained therein, and as we read the second, wherein she develops the really fertile powers of her imagination; the plot is drawn with so much vigour as to command our unqualified admiration. We can safely recommend the work to our friends, for its tone of virtuous feeling, and the chastity of sentiment that it breathes.<sup>20</sup>

The reviewer's opinion of Brunton's moral project is inconsistent: First condemning her "self vanity" in promoting such obvious moral aims, the reviewer then considers the work of the narrative itself as proof of its merits—a plot drawn with "vigour" that reveals the "fertile" powers of Brunton's imagination. It might appear that the reviewer is invested in seeing novelistic fiction and moral purpose as opposed, yet the closing sentence of the notice suggests the opposite by asserting that the work may be recommended for its "tone

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the contemporary debate see Jennifer L. Brady, "Theorizing a Reading Public: Sentimentality and Advice About Novel Reading in the Antebellum United States," *American Literature* 83.4 (2011): 719-746.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah More, *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* (1808; London: Charles Tilt, 1837), iv-v.

<sup>20</sup> "Article 21—no title," *Atkinson's Casket* 5 (1835): 299.

of virtuous feeling and the chastity of sentiment that it breathes.” The review indicates that although it was clear to contemporaries what *Discipline* was trying to do as a moral novel, the question of whether it succeeded was far from settled.

Moral novels irked critics who affiliated themselves with an emerging culture of letters, but they also alienated readers with religious investments. Critics who aligned themselves with the *Spectator* and Fielding rather than Richardson disapproved of didactic aims as impediments to narrative development. For example, a critic writing in the *Boston Spectator* in 1814 inveighs against novels that imposed moral points on scenes drawn from life:

If the narrative be conducted with talent, our curiosities and sympathies will be warmly excited for the fate of the hero or heroine; not one in a thousand will have patience to read the moral chapter, but rush on with the history. We should even venture to say, these essays however excellent in themselves, had better be totally omitted; and generally do more harm than good.<sup>21</sup>

Yet the review proceeds to praise Edgeworth’s *Belinda* for combining plot and moral:

The work is rich in valuable sentiment, and practical morality; not detached from the body of the relation, but flowing in the language of the leading personages, so as to constitute an essential part of the story.

Suspected by the literati, who vacillated on the question of whether plot could serve

moral purposes, the moral novel was not much better off with the religious. As J.B.D.

points out in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, *Belinda* inspired criticism from the

zealous for failing to inculcate doctrinal principles: “The only proof of her offense, that

we have ever heard adduced, is, that she has not, in so many words, made the inculcation

of religious truth and duty the theme of her writings.”<sup>22</sup> Although moral novels’

popularity suggested their secure place in the culture of the new nation, the dialogue they

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<sup>21</sup> “Literary and Miscellaneous: The Writer, No. XVII Belinda,” *The Boston Spectator* 1.36 (1814): 143.

<sup>22</sup> J.B.D., “Maria Edgeworth,” *The Southern Literary Messenger, Devoted to Every Department of Literature, and the Fine Arts*, 15.9 (1849): 584.

provoked reveals the newness of what they were attempting and the distance different groups of readers felt they needed to maintain from this uncertain genre. Indeed, this heterogeneity of reception was reflected in the novels themselves, which absorbed contemporary criticism into their representational choices and narrative structures.

Authors addressed critics' concerns in prefaces and integrated them into their literary method. In her preface to *The Gamesters; or the Ruins of Innocence* (1805), Caroline Matilda Thayer articulates the dangers that attended writing amidst so much disagreement:

At a period when the novelist is seldom greeted with a solitary smile of approbation from the whole regiment of literati; when even "the house is divided against itself," and novel writers attribute many of the fashionable foibles of the day, to novel reading; it may argue a degree of temerity to produce a work, which bears this "image and superscription."<sup>23</sup>

Though she faces criticism even from fellow novel writers, who condemn the form they continue to employ, Thayer determines that it is a proper vehicle for the purpose she intends—"to gain one soul to virtue, or lure one profligate from the arms of dissipation, or snatch from the precipice of ruin, one fair fabric of innocence." In order to accomplish this objective she is compelled to "throw the following sheets into their present form," a description suggestive of the moral novel's experimental character. Thayer is hardly sure that her work will meet with approbation, yet she deflects potential criticism by outlining her purpose, thus revealing the central role critique of the moral novel played in her composition.

Criticism of the moral novel's plausibility resulted in a form of realism particular to the genre that included complex plotting, fallible characters, and reflections on the novel as a genre. Nina Baym has noted the centrality of plot to contemporary definitions

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<sup>23</sup> Caroline Matilda Warren Thayer, *The Gamesters; or, The Ruins of Innocence* (1805; Boston: J. Shaw, 1828), ii.



of the novel and criticism of the moral novel bears out her point, lauding moral novels for their compelling and life-like plots, which were central to their categorization as novels.<sup>24</sup>

Moral novels also accommodated critical taste for historical fidelity by dividing their action into recognizable units of time (weeks, hours, months, years) with settings in the contemporary world. Additionally, they depicted characters' internal and external struggles with the psychological exactitude that was coming to distinguish the novel. Reflections on the novel within these works also established credibility by anticipating and engaging contemporary literary criticism. Unexpected turns in plot likewise served a realist function by limiting how much readers could know about characters' virtues at particular points, making the question of how to read virtue central. Through these formal devices, moral novels insisted on the compatibility of contemporary discourses of historical and psychological realism and moral ideology.

Contemporary conversation about experiential knowledge and the threat of moral relativism is evident in Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy* (1812), which makes its argument for virtue by contrasting it with the "mutability of human nature." Following the trials of Emily Hammond and her lover, the poet Kelroy, the novel plots Emily's mother's resistance to the match and the eventual deaths of all three characters. She agrees that Emily and Kelroy will marry once the latter has returned from India with the means to support a family, yet once he has departed she conspires with one of Emily's rejected suitors to forge a letter from Kelroy to Emily that rescinds their engagement. The letter cites changeability of feeling as justification for the break:

Upon what principle to account for the change which has lately taken place in my feelings towards you, I know not, unless you will suffer me to ascribe it to its real source, the *mutability of human nature*, but however

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<sup>24</sup> Baym, 66.

censurable I may appear to you, I should be much more so in my own estimation, if I hesitated to candidly inform you, that although I still reverence your virtues, and remember with delight your attractions, the impassioned preference with which they once inspired me exists no longer.<sup>25</sup>

The italics call attention to the perversity of the letter's logic. In a novel about sentiment—the accordance between feeling and higher moral law—justification through self-interest invokes the relativity that so disturbed critics of Locke and Hume. Though the reader might suspect a ruse, crucial information about Kelroy's state of mind is withheld and the reader is forced to conclude that his appearance of honorable intention was false.<sup>26</sup>

Although the letter is eventually revealed to be a fake, mutability persists as a theme in the fates of two of the novel's primary characters. Mrs. Hammond dies without remorse for the pain she has inflicted on her daughter, which will result in her early death. Suffering a stroke after she has married Emily to Dunlevy—a suitor of whom she approves—Mrs. Hammond's dying wishes are to have the papers destroyed that would implicate her in the production of the false letter:

But the obloquy which a discovery of them would throw upon her memory, and the misery and dissention which they might be the means of creating between Dunlevy and his wife, were the last agonizing ideas of her departing soul. (189)

Gone without a thought for the state of her soul or the condition of futurity, Mrs.

Hammond marks a signal contrast to her daughter, whose final words—"Think that I have been injured, but have forgiven those who have destroyed me.—Think, that situated as I now am, I regard my early death as a signal mercy" (190)—evinces resignation and

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<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Rush, *Kelroy* (1812; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 169. All further references given parenthetically.

<sup>26</sup> Dana Nelson points out that Kelroy and Emily possess poetic sensibilities but lack the more practical sense that would have alerted them to the trick that Mrs. Hammond and Marney have played on them with the letter. Dana L. Nelson, introduction, *Kelroy*, xvii-xviii.

charity. Yet Mrs. Hammond is not alone in leaving the world with emotions that do not fit paradigms of recognizable virtue. Kelroy is afflicted once he is informed of how he has been betrayed and “his approaches to insanity” begin to alarm his friends. Restless and unhappy, he takes to the sea; his boat is wrecked and he is killed. The novel ends with the ominous prognosis that “Kelroy and his sorrows were hushed to rest in the depths of the ocean” (194). Only one character in *Kelroy* experiences virtue as a lived sentiment; the novel’s focus is thus not perfection but the everyday failings of human nature—ambition, avarice, and resentment. The novel achieves its moral work by presenting Emily as a figure whose virtues are meaningful as they contrast with the quotidian miseries of those around her. By making her virtue a desirable option among other approaches to the business of living the novel argues for the benefits of morality in a recognizable social setting.

The representation of inner conflict also serves a pedagogical function in Susanna Rowson’s *Sarah, or the Exemplary Wife* (1813). Though its title suggests that its heroine will offer a pattern of behavior for achieving marital bliss in line with contemporary marriage manuals, its opening pages indicate a different situation: “Yes! Ann, the die is cast—I am a wife. But less a cheerful bride, one who looks forward with less hope, perhaps never existed.”<sup>27</sup> Sarah will learn to negotiate her husband Darnley’s open infidelity with a woman he brings to live in their household as well as his violent temper. As the preface to the novel forewarns, there will be no easy rewards for her efforts: “It may be objected that the example [of Sarah’s virtue] will lose its effect, as my heroine is not in the end rewarded for her exemplary patience, virtue, and forbearance: But it was

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<sup>27</sup> Susanna Rowson, *Sarah, or the Exemplary Wife* (Boston: Charles Williams, 1813), 3. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

because I wished to avoid every unnatural appearance, that I left Sarah to meet her reward in another world” (i). The novel’s realism derives from its heroine’s open admission of ambivalence about her marriage and her desire to weigh questions of virtue and right behavior for herself. At proof of another man’s adultery, she wonders, “Great God! thought I, are all men alike? Is there so such thing as stability or honor in the sex?” Reflecting that women are equally complicit in such affairs, she goes on, “Who then is to blame? Or on what must we throw the censure? On poor human nature?—How bewildered is the mind, how incapable the judgment, of deciding on these intricate points!” (125). Sarah’s exemplarity is gained through an internal struggle—a rational consideration of what constitutes right behavior in difficult circumstances. In this way, the novel engages both rationalist and empiricist intellectual currents by representing reflection and the demands of particular situations to argue the value of “patience, virtue, and forbearance.”

Yet reflection and imagination often failed, producing lessons through negative example. For instance, Leander Anderson, the protagonist of Thayer’s *Gamesters*, does not recognize the danger gambling poses to his peace. Instead he judges the gaming friends of his close associate Edward Somerton by the same standards that govern his own behavior:

His heart has hitherto beaten in unison with reason and virtue; yet his passions were warm, his temper extremely susceptible; and his mind, pure as the new fallen snow, and innocent as the sportive lambkin, could ill brook the idea that there were hearts differently moulded from his own.<sup>28</sup>

In a twist on Smithean notions of sympathy, Leander is tragically unable to conceive what motivates the gamesters until it is too late for him to extricate himself from their

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<sup>28</sup> Caroline Matilda Warren Thayer, *Gamesters; or the Ruins of Innocence* (1805; Boston: J. Shaw, 1828), 187. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

influence.<sup>29</sup> Not only does his imagination fail; he also mistakes an inclination to virtue and the power of the will as enough to protect him from ruin. The occasion of his dawning regret becomes an opportunity for the narrator to intervene with a statement of the case: “We stand upon a precipice, the passions at the bottom, like so many syrens [sic], lure us to their arms; we burst the feeble barriers of virtue; we tumble headlong to ruin, and all this time our *own will* leans on the side of virtue” (297). The reflection concludes that “some invisible arm, then, can alone shield us from destruction,” revealing the pedagogical purpose of Leander’s missteps in imagination and judgment. Lacking both the experience and imaginative capacity to understand the ruinous potential of gaming and conceiving the power of the will as sufficient to save him from ruin, Leander fails to exercise both his rational powers and capacity for faith.

Both Rowson’s Sarah and Thayer’s Leander are influenced by religion, demonstrating the connection certain moral novels forged between standards of moral behavior and traditional religious dictates. Sarah connects proper behavior—specifically the vows of fidelity and chastity undertaken in marriage—with biblical dictates when contemplating the love her husband’s mistress purportedly has for him:

Darnley says Jesse loves him; he is deceived; I cannot believe it possible for a woman who loves a man with that pure, yet sacredly tender emotion, which I at present imagine love to be, to suffer him to degrade himself in the eyes of the world, break the commands of the Creator, and infringe every moral obligation. (87-88)

Social duty, moral imperative, and divine commandment are treated as analogous terms, arranged not with the dictates of divinity first, but in a lateral series that suggests their equivalence. In moving between these different modes of framing adultery, Sarah’s

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<sup>29</sup> “As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation.” Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759; Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1969), 47.

reflections indicate how closely morality and traditional biblical precepts were related in the contemporary mind. Yet her separation of terms also gestures to a discursive distinction in the larger philosophical context between these different approaches to the same problem.

Thayer's *Gamesters* also relates its action to biblically derived ideas once Leander is driven to suicide. Recognizing Somerton's perfidy and the extent to which he has lost all hope of recovery, Leander throws himself into a river. The narrator reflects on his decision:

Yet there is one consoling reflection to sooth the sympathetic mind, already depressed with tragic glooms; when with the eye of faith, we look up to "Him who is invisible," we see our Almighty Parent, seated on a throne of mercy; and, though suicide stands foremost in the black catalogue of crimes, forbidden by the law of God and man; yet we are assured, that the Author of our existence is "able to save, even to the uttermost." (294)<sup>30</sup>

Leander's actions are related to a theological precedent—specifically, the verse from Hebrews. This citation is presented not as an alternative to the novel's previous meditations on reason and virtue, but as an extension of this discussion to the realm of the unseen. In the same spirit as Sarah's meditations, the narrator does not supplant moral discourse with the language of biblical revelation. Instead, moral imperative and scriptural injunction are treated as distinct but fundamentally related—the former dealing with the visible and social consequences of decision-making and the latter with its invisible repercussions.

Engaging contemporary concerns with rationalism, empiricism, and biblical truth through characterization, moral novels also reflected current thinking about fiction in represented conversations about novels and the act of moralizing. The protagonist of

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<sup>30</sup> "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." Hebrews 7:25.

Martha Meredith Read's *Margaretta; or, The Intricacies of the Heart* (1807) draws on novels when pursued by the wealthy Mr. de Burling, who has resolved that because she possesses a pretty face rather than wealth he will "join only in the silken bonds of love, with this charming maid."<sup>31</sup> Margaretta is ready for him, thanks to her reading. Reflecting on their first encounter, she claims,

Whilst he was here, he repeatedly told me that nature had designed me for a lady: at this I smiled, knowing that Providence generally places us in such situations, as we are best adapted to move in. Yet when he spoke, his voice was so soft and musical, that I listened to him with attention, even pleasure: not that my vanity was raised by his liberal, even profuse compliments; no, this I am persuaded is only the insignificant gallantry of the great world, as delineated to us in various novels. (29-30)

Her pleasure at the sound of his voice suggests that she cannot escape from a shared attraction, yet she is protected from his compliments by a penchant for novel reading that accords with her conservative belief in providential design. Convinced she has been placed in the most suitable social sphere, Margaretta's pious convictions are reinforced through her reading, which has revealed to her what false sentiment looks like—here, a refusal of social hierarchy. Interestingly, the novel will confirm the elitism of her convictions by revealing that she is the daughter of the wealthy English Lord Warren, indicating that morality, merit, and social caste belong together. Yet one important aspect of her morality—her ability to suspect de Burling and maintain necessary distance until the mystery of her birth is unraveled—is sustained by her knowledge of novels.

*Margaretta* supplies the reader with a moral, yet it does so while calling attention to the act of moralizing. Toward the end of the novel, Lord Warren reflects on the subject of the novel's title before Margaretta's erstwhile admirer and protector Captain Waller interrupts:

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<sup>31</sup> Martha Meredith Read, *Margaretta; or, The Intricacies of the Heart* (Philadelphia: Samuel F. Bradford, 1807), 14. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

“The human heart is a compound of intricacies,” said Lord Warren, “and this is exemplified in every day’s experience, and yet, who could delineate its windings! who trace each fine fibre to its source, and discover that particle, containing the double essence from which springs our actions, human or divine.” “This is moralizing,” vociferated the captain,— “Let us talk our own talk, and postpone that to a more serious moment.” (415)

The passage invites meditation on the moral significance of the behaviors it has

charted—Margaretta’s virtue, de Burling’s transformation from rake to upright lover, and the maliciousness of de Burling’s rejected fiancée, Arabella Roulant. In the same spirit as Margaretta’s remarks on the pedagogical value of novels, which names what the novel aims to accomplish, Lord Warren’s speech enacts the moralizing that Captain Waller describes. The novel thus guards against criticism of its didacticism by thematizing it in dialogue, demonstrating artistic control of its subject.

Realistic characters, rational and empirical knowledge, and the relationship between things seen and unseen also played a role in works that have been central to critical discussions of early American literature. For example, Hannah Webster Foster’s novel *The Coquette; or The History of Eliza Wharton* (1797) is frequently discussed as an exploration of the tensions inherent in the emerging politics of the post-Revolutionary period—debates about consensual modes of governance, individual self-interest, and public good.<sup>32</sup> This scholarship has focused on the novel’s representation of women, particularly as they revealed the limitations of the American experiment.<sup>33</sup> Yet to return to my earlier claim, the tension between subject and system, individual desire and collective

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<sup>32</sup> Gillian Brown, *Consent of the Governed*, chapter five; Gillian Brown, “Consent, Coquetry, and Consequences,” *ALH* 24.3 (1997): 625-652; Barnes, chapter three.

<sup>33</sup> On female consent, Gillian Brown notes: “Far from female consent being a contradiction in terms, then, female consent epitomizes individual subjection in a liberal society.” Brown “Consent,” 627. Similarly, Cathy Davidson describes the central tension of *The Coquette* and other early sentimental novels as follows: “*The Coquette* and other sentimental novels in the new Republic are ultimately about silence, subservience, stasis (the accepted attributes of women as traditionally defined) in contradistinction to conflicting impulses toward independence, action, and self-expression (the ideals of the new American nation).” Davidson, 147.



good can be traced to discourses of virtue that relied on notions of rightness, justice, and fitness—all universalizing categories. The political issues that early national moral novels explored thus unfolded within a larger philosophical context that sought to relate politics, social roles, and revolutionary upheavals with ideal standards of rectitude.<sup>34</sup>

Eliza Wharton's will has been central to scholarship on the novel, yet it is often abstracted from the context in which conversations about self-determination mattered most. Central to post-Revolutionary and post-Edwardsian theology were discussions of whether humans were capable of virtuous action through inclination of the will and the extent to which reason was an aid or obstacle to virtue.<sup>35</sup> *The Coquette* does not engage theology, but it is invested in these questions.<sup>36</sup> Eliza's willfulness is framed in language that marks the novel's awareness of contemporary theology. Inclined through former habits to a "pleasing pensiveness," she expects this mindset to continue once her fiancé Mr. Haly has died, taking his resignation at the moment of death as inspiration: "The disposition of mind which I now feel I wish to cultivate. Calm, placid, and serene, thoughtful of my duty, and benevolent to all around me, I wish for no other connection than that of friendship."<sup>37</sup> This ideal disposition becomes impeded once a new and less

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<sup>34</sup> Edward Cahill has described this tension in early American aesthetic theory as a dialectic of liberty: "This dialectic of liberty in aesthetic theory offered American writers a rich critical vocabulary for articulating the imperatives and challenges of political liberty and, thus, for confronting the social contradictions of Revolutionary and early national culture. By invoking models of virtuous pleasure and regulated imagination, they constructed and experimented with ideal proportions of liberty and constraint. But they also interrogated such ideas as a means of comprehending the pressures of revolution, constitution-making, and nation-formation, the conflicts of class, race, and gender, and the vicissitudes of political life in a republic." Cahill, 5. According to his argument, aesthetic theory after 1830 became more descriptive than analytical, as the attachment to a universalizing or allegorical impulse was replaced by a romantic and organic conception of the synonymy of idea and art object. Cahill, 226.

<sup>35</sup> See Holifield; Noll; and Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Which is not surprising given its heroine is the daughter of a minister and Foster was herself the wife of a clergyman. Davidson, 143.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Webster Foster, *The Coquette; or The History of Eliza Wharton* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 107. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

constrained mode of behavior becomes available: “Naturally cheerful, volatile, and unreflecting, the opposite disposition I have found to contain sources of enjoyment which I was before unconscious of possessing” (108). The remainder of the narrative will be an exploration of the benefits and pitfalls of this type of pleasure, which Eliza will continue to frame, often wryly, in the terms of contemporary religious discourse: “Sometimes I think of becoming a predestinarian, and submitting implicitly to fate, without any exercise of free will; but, as mine seems to be a wayward one, I would counteract the operations of it, if possible” (122).

Although the novel’s ending seems to condemn Eliza’s experiments in social and romantic pleasure, the narrative creates space earlier for her objections to marriage to appear rational. In explaining her motivations to Mr. Boyer, her most respectable suitor, she offers an accurate assessment of her personality:

While I own myself under obligations for the esteem which you are pleased to profess for me, and in return, acknowledge, that neither your person nor manners are disagreeable to me, I recoil at the thought of immediately forming a connection, which must confine me to the duties of domestic life, and make me dependent for happiness, perhaps too, for subsistence, upon a class of people, who will claim the right of scrutinizing every part of my conduct. (126)

Rather than taking advantage of the situation, Eliza considers it from the perspective of fitness, surveying what seems most necessary to her and weighing it against what marrying Boyer would require. As Gillian Brown has argued, Eliza’s choice between ongoing social freedom and a socially sanctioned marriage is illusory, and her coquetry or postponement of consent only serves to make the limitations of her agency more visible.<sup>38</sup> Though she does not possess a choice, she does have an opportunity to articulate her needs and to rationally consider her compatibility with Boyer, which the previous

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<sup>38</sup> These limitations also reveal liberty’s dependence on constraint. Brown, “Consent,” 628, 638.

narrative action suggests is as incongruous as she claims it to be. Her observations do not lose credence as the plot progresses, despite the fact that she comes to regret not marrying Boyer, because they are accurate assessments at this point in the narrative.

Despite Eliza's seduction and demise, her self-knowledge remains central to the narrative and distinguishes *The Coquette*'s contribution to the moral literature on Elizabeth Whitman. In describing the difference between the novel and the contemporary tracts that recited Elizabeth Whitman's history, Cathy Davidson notes:

The tract can lecture in the abstract, but the conservative novel, portraying through concrete example, evokes (quite inappropriately for its own rhetorical purposes) the legal, social, and political status of the average female reader, and that reader is not apt to applaud the tortured image of her own condition.<sup>39</sup>

Though tracts and novels were not as disparate as Davidson suggests, her evocation of their common pedagogical purpose is significant for considering how Eliza's development and self-knowledge fit into a narrative structure that prevents her from having a meaningful choice.<sup>40</sup> The function of the tracts and *The Coquette* was not to disrupt a moral order in which trusting the wrong men proves disastrous; instead, it is to demonstrate to a rational reading public how, hypothetically, one might end up in this situation. Eliza's experiments in self-knowledge would have mattered to the novel's readers because her thinking reflected contemporary conversations about female capacity for rationality, education, and civic participation, and because the novel placed these developments within a context that featured older patterns (the seduction plot), characters (the flirt and the rake), and moral prerogatives. In this way, the elements of the novel that pulled away from the seduction plot's inevitability were the content of its modern moral lesson.

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<sup>39</sup> Davidson, 128.

<sup>40</sup> For more on the similarities between tracts and novels see chapter two.

The problem of will and self-determination was also at issue in Frances Jacson's *Rhoda* (1816)—a novel Maria Edgeworth claimed to prefer to Austen's *Emma* (1815).<sup>41</sup> The novel was popular enough to enjoy multiple editions in the States, with the editors at Wills & Lilly of Boston claiming of their second edition:

The work we are about to introduce to the attention of our readers, is not merely exempt from the ordinary objections preferred against publications of this description, but presents such numerous elegancies, and illustrates so sound a moral, that we recommend it to the perusal of all our female readers; particularly to those whose pretty faces and fascinating manners become dangerous possessions, from being the allies of vanity, irresolution, and frivolity.<sup>42</sup>

*Rhoda* is intelligent and independent, much like Eliza Wharton, and her tragedy is also framed as the result of inexorable social circumstances. Yet the lineaments of her tale follow a different and less predictable course. Adopted into the Strickland family as the child of one of its disobedient and deceased members, *Rhoda* is initially cared for by a bachelor uncle. After his death she is taken by her aunt and uncle to London and introduced into fashionable society, where it is made clear to her that she must secure an advantageous match despite her secret engagement to Mr. Ponsonby, the pupil of the local clergyman in the village where she has come of age. In London, she attracts the interest of Sir James Osbourne and is prevailed upon by her aunt to accept his offer of marriage. The second half of the novel follows the aftermath of this decision, which is framed as a mistake despite its social advantages. *Rhoda* is unable to fully gain the trust of her husband once he realizes she was attached to someone else when accepting his engagement, and he is prevailed upon by one of the ladies he has passed over along with one of the men *Rhoda* has flirted with to believe that she is having an affair. Engaging a duel to exact his revenge, Sir James misses his shot and kills himself instead. The plot

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<sup>41</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 44.

<sup>42</sup> "Domestic Literature and Science," *The Analectic Magazine* 7 (1816): 547.

thus departs from sentimental convention: it does not follow a seduction, nor does it end with a happy marriage. Instead, it follows Rhoda's progress through her marriage in order to trace the consequences of erroneous decision-making driven by worldly concerns.

The complexity of Rhoda's thought process, anchored in the realities of contemporary English life, forms the content of the novel's warning against the consequences of vanity. For example, Rhoda is gratified upon being adopted by her aunt and uncle Strickland and offered the chance to travel to London, but she chafes at the mode they use to convey her to the city:

She sincerely believed that they [her tears] flowed wholly from her approaching separation from a place and friends so dear to her; but a more accurate investigation of the human heart would have found that they sprung not from *one* source alone; that mortification was mingled with sorrow, and that she was not only grieved at being unable to stay, but vexed with the mode in which she was to go.<sup>43</sup>

At once sincere and vain, Rhoda blends elements of the admirable and the questionable, much in the spirit of Eliza Wharton.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, she resists convention in a way that suggests a debt to contemporary conversation about women's rational capacities. Thus she objects to her aunt's suggestion that a future husband will pay the debts she accrues in dress and to the idea that "a bon mot or the shrug of shoulders from a pretty woman" is the only type of literary criticism she has to offer (I: 278). That same spirit is revealed to be part of her downfall: after Osbourne has proposed, her uncle is anxious for her to accept, but her aunt placates him by citing Rhoda's independence of mind: "Make yourself perfectly easy: Rhoda will be Lady Osbourne; but really we must allow her to take her own methods of becoming so" (II. II: 38-9). Calculating on Rhoda's rational

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<sup>43</sup> Frances Jacson, *Rhoda: A Novel* (London: Henry Colburn, 1816), I: 192-3. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

<sup>44</sup> According to one reviewer, "She is, in short, one of those lovely bewitching creatures, whom everybody admires and excuses, but whose conduct nobody approves." "Rhoda," *The North American Review and Miscellaneous Journal* 3.8 (1816): 216.

autonomy, her aunt's comment also reveals the anxiety underlying the novel's exploration of decision-making—that rationality might be tainted by vanity.

Rhoda's decision to rescind her engagement to Ponsonby is presented as a complicated response her newfound dependence on luxury. She is caught between an acknowledgement of the vacuity of the priorities she has absorbed and the decision to reject them: "To forgo the glitter of life she found to be impossible: yet, even in the moment when it seemed to be secured she felt all its nothingness; and hated and despised herself for the power that it had over her" (II. II: 64). This power is not accidental, and the reader is privy to her aunt Strickland's maneuvers to render Rhoda's financial situation precarious enough to make the prospect of discharged debts seem both desirable and necessary. Despite being subject to these hidden forces, Rhoda is presented less as a victim than as a participant, albeit partial, in the obfuscation necessary to make a match with Osbourne seem reasonable. She yields to the situation in the spirit of deluded martyrdom:

Nor was it extraordinary that the sadness, with which Rhoda felt this resignation to be accompanied, should deceive her into the belief that she was really about to sacrifice herself to a principle of justice, and that she was rather the victim of circumstances, than the slave of vanity. (II. II: 64)

Although a reader might guess from aunt Strickland's machinations that Rhoda will be induced to accept Osbourne, her turn to an ethos of self-sacrifice refuses a more conventional sentimental plot in which she is the victim of her aunt's greed. Instead, the passage frames Rhoda's self-deception as an ironic and tragic extension of her earnest commitment to doing right and sensitivity to social obligation. The scene thus reveals the social circumstances that shape its heroine's emerging character and decision-making. Following Rhoda into the early years of her marriage, the novel works against

sentimental convention to demonstrate how moral decisions involving universal standards of right and wrong are made in particular situations that entail specific consequences.

Charles Brockden Brown's neglected novel *Jane Talbot* (1801) also relies for its moral point on unexpected turns and circumstances in narrative plot. Critical conversation about Brown's last novels, *Jane Talbot* and *Clara Howard* (1801), has eschewed the topic of moral ideology in favor of relating both to republicanism, revolution, expansionism, nationalism, gender, bourgeois liberalism, and transatlantic aesthetics.<sup>45</sup> Thus Michelle Burnham reads the manipulation of epistolary plot in *Clara Howard*—the withholding of key information about characters that creates a “stalled temporality” and pattern of anticipation—as a gesture to the failure of revolution to fully arrive for Brown's readers.<sup>46</sup> The interdependence between letters and knowledge that Burnham identifies is analogous to the indeterminacy that has featured prominently in discussions of Brown's earlier novels, suggesting continuity between the earlier and later works.<sup>47</sup> Yet the concerns that shape *Jane Talbot* differ from those in *Wieland* (1798) or *Edgar Huntly* (1799) in their concerted focus on issues of religious faith, virtue, and fidelity. Rather than reading these issues as the markers of a bourgeois Protestant conservatism or a capitulation to a feminized print marketplace, I read them in a line with

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<sup>45</sup> For a useful overview of recent issues in scholarship on Brown and the historical trajectory from Bernard Rosenthal's 1981 volume, *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown*, which inaugurated a renewed interest in Brown's work, to the present see the introduction to Philip Barnard, Mark L. Kamrath, and Stephen Shapiro, eds., *Revising Charles Brockden Brown: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality in the Early Republic* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> Michelle Burnham, “Epistolarity, Anticipation, and Revolution in *Clara Howard*,” in Barnard, Kamrath, and Shapiro, 259-280. On *Clara Howard*'s engagement with bourgeois liberalism see Bruce Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), particularly chapter five, and Jared Gardner, “The Literary Museum and the Unsettling of the Early American Novel,” *ELH* 67.3 (2000): 743-771.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Witherington, “Brockden Brown's Other Novels: *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot*,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 29.3 (1974): 260

the ideas that shaped the other moral novels I have discussed.<sup>48</sup> By adopting the form of the moral novel, Brown experimented in the same vein as his peers with reconciling moral paradigms, rational reflection, and lived experience. Unlike his contemporaries, he employed a more daring indeterminacy in plot to do so.

Initially, the novel's subject and characters seem familiar, yet Brown uses the epistolary form to reveal the subjective biases of the primary actors. Beginning with Jane's letters to her suitor Henry Colden, the novel promises to be a tale of an innocent and long-suffering young woman whose lover is distant and unresponsive. Yet this expectation is quickly overturned as both her previous marriage and warmth of temper are revealed. Recounting her youthful passion and intractability at her mother's death in a letter to Colden, she claims: "This may serve as a specimen of the impetuosity of my temper. It was always fervent and unruly, unacquainted with moderation in its attachments, violent in its indignation and enmity, but easily persuaded to pity and forgiveness."<sup>49</sup> Though her protestations of affection for Colden belong firmly within the sentimental tradition, her acknowledged impetuosity balks easy absorption within an emergent "cult of womanhood" ideal. If Jane's self-proclaimed erraticism promises narrative instability, so too does Colden's refusal to marry her without her fortune—the consequence of their union should they overlook Jane's adopted mother Mrs. Fielder's objections. He argues that he is not fit for labor, echoing Rousseau in his insistence on his own inimitability:

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<sup>48</sup> My reading is thus aligned with Edward Cahill's discussion of Brown's engagement with contemporary discourses of aesthetics, imagination, and moral sentiment: "In the midst of the frenetic political, social, economic, and philosophical climate of the 1790s, Brown finds the idea of the imagination to be highly ambiguous. But he also assumes the novel's ability to comprehend the complexities of aesthetic experience and to pursue their implications for moral life in America." Cahill, 167.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, *Jane Talbot* (1801; Port Washington: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1963), 6. All subsequent references given parenthetically.



I cannot labor for bread; I cannot work to live. In that respect I have no parallel. The world does not contain my likeness. My very nature unfits me for profitable business. My dependence must ever be on others or on fortune. (101)

Colden also refuses to behave in accordance with narrative convention, which would have him as a dutiful lover willing to hazard all on the strength of his affection for Jane. Instead he seems to confirm Mrs. Fielder's accusations against his character and motivations by asserting his interest in Jane's fortune and refusing to marry her without it. Yet both his revelation and Jane's beg the question of what love without principles is capable of effecting—for Jane, a love fervent and incapable of moderation, and for Colden, a love without the willingness to sacrifice comfort.

A central plot twist suggests an answer, as Mrs. Fielder's letters are introduced and the question of the chasteness of Jane and Colden's connection is raised. Mrs. Fielder's initial letter to Jane rebukes her for actions that are unstated. She disbelieves reports she has heard that Jane plans to marry Colden: "Indiscreet as you have been, there are, I hope, bounds which your education will not permit you to pass. Some regard, I hope, you will have for your own reputation. If your conscience object not to this proceeding, the dread of infamy, at least, will check your career" (57). Her accusation of indiscretion aligns with what Jane has already revealed about herself, yet the matter of her objection seems to contradict the friendship Jane and Colden have described as existing between them during Jane's husband's lifetime. Jane's reply to Mrs. Fielder deepens the mystery; she exhibits surprise and inquires what her guardian could possibly know against Colden. Mrs. Fielder's reply is definitive and extends the reader's mistrust of Jane: "Thy effrontery in boasting of thy innocence, in calling this wretch thy friend, thy soul's friend, the means of securing the favor of a pure and all-seeing Judge, exceeds

all that I supposed possible in human nature” (64). Confirming Jane’s self-characterization of “impetuosity,” but extending this claim to an action that casts the novel’s sentimental economy of sympathy into doubt, the series of letters between Mrs. Fielder and Jane open the question of the novel’s moral prerogative.

Though Mrs. Fielder’s allegations prove erroneous, they reveal the novel’s moral objective to explore how far individuals with different commitments to religious sentiment ought to go in pursuing a union. Before producing a forged note intimating that Jane and Colden became lovers while her husband was still alive—a forgery perpetrated by Jane’s neighbor Miss Jessup and delivered to Mrs. Fielder by Talbot—Mrs. Fielder mentions Colden’s reputation for skepticism as proof that he is no match for Jane. Consulting a friend of Colden’s for proof of his character, Mrs. Fielder is provided with letters attesting to his predilection for Godwin and his denial of revelation and the necessity of marriage (70). Jane finds his skepticism a productive goad to further consideration of her own beliefs, preferring it to Talbot’s “honest, regular, sober” but unthinking Christian conduct (67). She discovers a more rational form of faith through the careful consideration of alternatives: “I, who am imagined to incur such formidable perils from intercourse with you, am, in truth, indebted to you alone for all my piety,—all of it that is permanent and rational” (136). This rational Christianity is unprejudiced; thus Jane claims to be advanced in “candor” as well as knowledge:

My belief is stronger than it ever was, but I no longer hold in scorn or abhorrence those who differ from me. I perceive the speciousness of those fallacies by which they are deluded. I find it possible for me to disbelieve and yet retain their claims to our reverence, our affection, and especially our good offices. (136)

The exact nature of how much “affection” Jane might safely bestow on Colden without unanimity of belief is the primary issue at stake in conversations about their union. Their

purported affair appears to overshadow this question, though for Mrs. Fielder it is the natural extension of Colden's iconoclasm. Thus, even when the letter has been called into question, she continues to disprove of his character, which leads Jane to give him up.

Jane does not initially view Colden's religious doubts as an impediment to their marriage, but their separation leads her to reconsider. Colden leaves on a series of voyages to mitigate his unhappiness and Jane reaches out to his sister to stay apprised of his movements. He returns to find Mrs. Fielder dead and Jane possessed of her dying permission to marry Colden should he return. With that impediment removed, the only remaining objection is his skepticism, which he confesses in a letter to his brother-in-law is completely removed. With this information Jane writes,

My words cannot utter, but thy own heart perhaps can conceive the rapture which thy confession of a change in thy opinions have afforded me. All of my prayers, Henry, have not been *merely* for your return. Indeed, whatever might have been the dictates, however absolute the dominion, of passion, union with you would have been *very* far from completing my felicity, unless our hopes and opinions, as well as our persons and hearts, were united. (237)

This confession seems contradictory, since she has at no point refused marriage on religious grounds, nor does she do so here. Instead, she intimates that their happiness will be more secure given a likeness of opinion. It is therefore difficult to reconcile what appears to be the novel's moral point—that agreement in religious opinion is necessary for conjugal happiness—with the novel's action. Jane has not refused Colden for his religious doubts; in fact, she has claimed their benefit for her own faith. Moreover, the purported affair between Colden and Jane called her virtue into question for a significant part of the novel, making the differences between them seem less rather than more dramatic. Yet the affair is an attempt to think through the consequences of skepticism, since the reader is led to believe that Colden's flouting of marriage leads him to an affair

with a married woman. Though the plot reasserts Jane's innocence, it does so by way of asking the reader to contemplate the edge of virtue and the necessity of an agreement in religious principles for marital happiness. In this way, the action of the plot serves as an epistemological argument for the novel's moral.

I turn now to another neglected moral novel by a major early American author—James Fenimore Cooper's *Precaution* (1820)—but I do so by way of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817), which is generally accepted as the model for Cooper's first work.<sup>50</sup> The novel, which received less notice than Austen's other works, was praised both for its realism and representation of virtue. Among the contemporary reviews, George Hatley's essay in the *Quarterly Review* of 1821 is the most thorough, placing *Persuasion* within a contemporary landscape still doubtful of fiction's merits. He notes that novels are increasingly valued for the “artificial experience” they offer, which complements moral knowledge conveyed through precepts. In Austen's work, moral knowledge emerges organically from the novel's realistic plot:

The moral lessons also of this lady's novels, though clearly and impressively conveyed, are not offensively put forward, but spring incidentally from the circumstances of the story; they are not forced upon the reader, but he is left to collect them (though without any difficulty) for himself: her's is that unpretending kind of instruction which is furnished by real life; and certainly no author has ever conformed more closely to real life, as well as in the incidents, as in the characters and descriptions.<sup>51</sup>

Hartley finds Austen's treatment of moral concerns more persuasive than Hannah More's

*Cælebs in Search of a Wife*, which he characterizes as less a novel than a “dramatic sermon.” Austen also fares better than Edgeworth, who is critiqued for her narratives'

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<sup>50</sup> See George E. Hastings, “How Cooper Became a Novelist,” *American Literature* 12.1 (1940): 20-51 for the definitive formal treatment of the subject. Most critics have built from Hastings' work by claiming that Cooper was indebted to some one of Austen's novels, but Hastings makes a detailed case for its being *Persuasion* rather than *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

<sup>51</sup> George Hartley, Review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, *Quarterly Review* 24 (1821): 360.

direct moralizing and romantic improbabilities.<sup>52</sup>In Hartley's estimation realism is the best vehicle for moralizing, not only because the form of fiction provides readers with a useful experience, but also because realistic fiction makes moral behavior seem imitable.<sup>53</sup>Rather than seeing rationality and realistic representation as antithetical to moral concerns, Hartley wagers that realistic fiction (in the right hands) is an important mode of communicating the reasonableness of moral sentiment.

The contemporary sense of the term "persuasion" confirms the synthesis that Hartley praised in Austen's work between representation drawn from experience and moral and religious principle. As Jane Stabler has argued, the romantic understanding of the term was that of an inner conviction or religious belief.<sup>54</sup>Given the novel's sympathetic treatment of romanticism, it seems probable that this definition forms part of the title's sense. Yet the novel is equally invested in the idea of persuasion as a conviction predicated on experience. Hence Anne Elliot's central observation about her youthful decision to refuse Captain Wentworth's offer of marriage, following the advice of her godmother Lady Russell:

She was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession, all their probable fears, delays, and disappointments, she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Hartley, 358.

<sup>53</sup> Other reviews of the novel agreed on its realism and Christian sentiment, though the review in *The British Critic* questioned the virtues of a novel whose moral seemed to be "that young people should always marry according to their own inclinations and upon their own judgment." "Art. V Northanger Abbey and Persuasion," *The British Critic* 9 (1818): 301. See also "Book review," *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* (May 1818): 433-35. For more on fictional realism as a vehicle of inoculation against sin see Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Jane Stabler, "'Persuasion' in *Persuasion*," in *Master Narratives: Tellers and telling in the English novel*, ed. Richard Gravil (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), 55.

<sup>55</sup> Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 29. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

The novel is initially about this form of persuasion—the conviction that adhering to one’s purpose, if it is right, is best in all cases regardless of resistance. Nevertheless, further progress of the plot reveals that a different form of persuasion is central to the novel’s moral. Both Anne and Wentworth must reconsider the assumptions they have brought to their unexpected reunion, eight years after parting. Anne will rescind her claim that disobedience at all costs would have brought her happiness, reasoning instead (once she is secure in Wentworth’s affections a second time) that she was right not to cause pain to family and friends, though their prejudices were misguided. Similarly, Wentworth gains an appreciation of the distinction “between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will” (227) through a flirtation with Louisa Musgrove, which places Anne’s submission to the will of others in a new light. Thus they are both persuaded to the merits of a balanced position between the exigencies of outside claims and the demands of individual inclination.

While *Persuasion* may have presented its moral points in a more subtle fashion than any of Edgeworth’s works, it is more explicit about highlighting these points than Austen’s previous novels.<sup>56</sup> Yet it also integrates irony into its morality in order to give it a rational dimension. The novel moves between these types of representation. Of Lady Russell we are given the following uncompromising judgment: “She had a cultivated mind, and was, generally speaking, rational and consistent—but she had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequences, which blinded her a little to the faults of those that possessed them” (12). This statement is repetitious (Lady Russell’s prejudice is stated and then defined, despite there being little need for clarification) and unnecessarily qualified (she exhibited more than “a little” blindness toward Captain

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<sup>56</sup> With the possible exception of *Mansfield Park* (1814), also notable for its moral and religious sentiment.

Wentworth, it turns out). Wentworth's reflections on what he learned through his interactions with Louisa Musgrove are presented in an equally straightforward if less labored manner. Anne wonders after Louisa's accident at Lyme whether Wentworth will now question his commitment to unwavering determination, a quality he claimed to admire in Louisa, and his explanation at the end of the novel of what he learned at Lyme functions as an answer: "There, he had leant to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind" (227). At Lyme he realizes that Anne possesses the latter, and can (almost) understand her previous motivations in refusing him. The novel's moral is the position Wentworth describes as the product of his experience—an ability to acknowledge the necessity of accommodating social obligations and personal inclinations—which, because articulated as a lesson, leaves the reader no doubt as to its significance.

Yet the novel also uses irony to make its lesson rational. Critical conversation has vacillated between seeing Anne as the unbiased center of the novel and accounting for her personal investments.<sup>57</sup> At certain moments, she demonstrates an ironic awareness of her prepossessions that confirms both her rationality and her humanity. For example, after recommending to the romantic Captain Benwick that he ought to balance his reading of poetry with prose, including the works of the best moralists and "such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering" that would rouse the spirit to "moral and religious endurances," Anne reflects on her advice:

When the evening was over, Anne could not help but be amused at the idea of her coming to Lyme, to preach patience and resignation to a young man whom she had never seen before; nor could she help fearing, on more

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<sup>57</sup> Stabler, 62-3.

serious reflection, that, like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination. (94)

Anne's appreciation of the situation's irony deepens her moral authority. Rather than demeaning the aspiration to religious and moral fortitude she has recommended, her amusement only serves to solidify its reasonableness, since in it she avoids the pitfalls of hypocrisy by acknowledging her own position. Her reaction to her own advice thus combines morality and an awareness of personal history and experience—the subject of the novel's moral.

At other moments Anne is not in on the joke, yet these incidents also confirm the humanity of her advice by demonstrating the personal investments she shares with other characters. The novel is gentler with her biases than it is with other forms of prejudice since they emanate from a worthy cause—her love of Wentworth, which grows into a well-considered claim over the course of the novel. Yet at certain moments the narration places the reader outside Anne's perspective to remind them that she has perceptual limits. For example, after she has reasoned her fidelity to Wentworth and her concomitant resolve to reject her cousin Mr. Elliot, the narration continues:

Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting with from Camden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way. (181)

Though Anne is not aware of the joke in the passage, it achieves the same effect as the earlier representation of her amusement by adding depth to her character and humanity to her resolve to bear the consequences of her earlier decision about Wentworth. Both her struggle to retain composure in the face of his flirtation with Louisa Musgrove and her advice to Benwick gain clarity in this moment, despite its appearance as a joke at her expense, in its representation of her feelings from a third-person point of view. The



perspective on the past that Anne adopts by the novel's end and her resolution to move forward by considering the desires of others and her own preferences thus appear hard-won in light of this moment, which uses irony to reveal her emotional investments.

Irony shapes the novel's conclusion, which offers a moral by mimicking a more straightforward didacticism. A contemporary review in *The British Critic* notes that the moral of the novel "seems to be, that young people should always marry according to their own inclinations and upon their own judgment,"<sup>58</sup> and the beginning of the final chapter seems to confirm this reading:

When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or even so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth; and if such parties succeed, how should a Captain Wentworth and an Anne Elliot, with the advantage of maturity of mind, consciousness of right, and one independent fortune between them, fail of bearing down every opposition? (232)

The first sentence of the passage is not the moral, as the second line makes clear. Rather than valorizing the waywardness of youth, the second sentence stresses the "maturity" of Wentworth and Anne's position and their "consciousness of right." Persuasion thus emerges in the comparison between the two phrases as a well-considered conviction evolved from experience, but it depends on an ironic reading of the rhetorical question posed in the second sentence. And though such rhetorical framing suggests the narrative's distance from the straightforward didacticism of a Brunton or Jacson novel, the passage nevertheless presents a moral point to readers who are thinking about the plot as it has developed Anne and Wentworth's reasoned perspective.

Though the inspiration of James Fenimore Cooper's first novel *Precaution* is not certain, evidence suggests that it was an English moral novel—very likely *Persuasion*.

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<sup>58</sup> "Art.V," 301.

George E. Hastings has pointed out the numerous plot similarities between the two novels, far more than *Precaution* shared with *Pride & Prejudice* or Amelia Opie's *Tales of the Heart* (1818), another possible inspiration. The genre that Cooper imagined himself working in admits no doubt. Susan Fenimore Cooper noted in her essay "Small Family Memories" (1883) that he "resolved to imitate the tone and character of an English novel of the ordinary type," understood as "the Opie School of English novels."<sup>59</sup> There is perhaps an argument against seeing Austen's work as a precedent, since her use of irony, despite being pedagogical, distinguished her from authors such as Opie, Brunton, and More. Yet Cooper himself placed Austen among these writers, arguing that they offered a realistic model for novel writing. Responding to J. G. Lockhart's grandiose claims for Scott's significance in *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1837), Cooper maintained that Scott was not to be credited with doing away with a previous generation of "sickly sentimentalism." Instead that honor belonged to the school of writers composed of Edgeworth, Austen, Opie, More, and Brunton, whose writing "was as free from sentimentalism as Scott, and, because less heroic, perhaps more true to every-day nature."<sup>60</sup> Though his contemporaries were energetic in dismissing Cooper's reliance on English models, and though Cooper himself would later claim *Precaution* was both "graver" and less accomplished than *The Spy* (1821), his decision to begin his career with a moral novel suggests his acknowledgment of value in writing that depicted everyday events with a pedagogical purpose.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Hastings, 21. It is worth pointing out that Opie's most popular works in early national America were her tales. On the relationship between tales and novels see chapter two.

<sup>60</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, "Literary Notices: *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*," *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine*, 12.4 (1838): 264.

<sup>61</sup> Cooper was completing work on *The Spy* when *Precaution* was published, and Wayne Franklin notes that he saw the second work as superior to the first. Wayne Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 271. In his preface to *The Pioneers* (1823) Cooper

Though *Persuasion* may have been Cooper's model, his method of framing moral knowledge differed from Austen's ironic rationalization of characters' convictions. Indeed, the title of each evinces their difference: while persuasion is an opinion arising from experience, precaution is the principle by which one avoids it. In place of the carefully considered "consciousness of right" that *Persuasion*'s primary characters discover by living, Cooper's characters and narrator volunteer precepts designed to apply regardless of experience, in order to prevent its unwanted consequences. For instance, the primary moral point of the novel is introduced independent of character or setting:

Marriage is called a lottery, and it is thought, like all other lotteries, there are more blanks than prizes; yet is it not made more precarious than it ought to be, by our neglect of that degree of precaution which we would be ridiculed for omitting in conducting our everyday concerns?<sup>62</sup>

It would be difficult to deduce from this series of observations that it occurs a third of the way into the action. Lest the reader lose the sense of connection between narrative action and moral lesson—a connection virtually impossible to make given the abstraction of precept from plot—the narrator specifies how these reflections apply to the novel thus far:

Our principle characters are possessed of these diversified views of the evils to be averted. Mrs. Wilson considers Christianity an indispensable requisite in the husband to be *permitted* to her charge, and watches against the *possibility* of any other than a Christian's gaining the affections of Emily. (123)

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claimed: "The first book was written, because I was told that I could not write a grave tale; so, to prove that the world did not know me, I wrote one that was so grave nobody would read it; wherein I think that I had much the best of the argument." Cooper, preface, *The Pioneers* (1823; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 3. Interestingly he calls *Precaution* a tale, which may have simply meant fiction with a moral rather than serving as a designation of length as Nina Baym has suggested. Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 201-2. For an example of the negative contemporary response to Cooper's use of the moral novel see "Works of Fenimore Cooper," *The American Quarterly Review*, 17.34 (1835): 407-431.

<sup>62</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *Precaution* (1820; North Hollywood: Ægypan Press, 2008), 122-3. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

The passage is chary in its credit to the reader, who is presumed incapable of connecting the plot to this point—Emily Moseley’s deepening regard for George Denbigh, about whom she knows little, and her godmother Mrs. Wilson’s wariness of his character—with the idea of precaution. It implies, too, a lack of trust in writing and its capacity to blend plot and moral principle. This inability to make the moral appear as a natural development of the action is not an inevitable consequence of the genre but a function of Cooper’s skill. Both *Jane Talbot* and *Persuasion*—the final fictional works of their respective authors—attest to what a career’s worth of expertise can bring to the novelistic presentation of moral points. Yet Cooper was hardly experienced enough at this point to manage narrative matter with the same degree of aptitude.

It was in writing moral fiction that Cooper became a novelist, however, and evidence of his growing familiarity with his craft is evident particularly in the novel’s second half. The first part of the novel abounds with descriptions that are either redundant or empty of narrative significance. Thus we are given assertions about characters that repeat what is evident in dialogue (“ ‘How fortunate you should all happen to be near!’ said the tender-hearted Clara” [38]), along with descriptions of characters that play no role in the narrative action:

Lady Moseley was religious, but hardly pious; she was charitable in deeds, but not always in opinions; her intentions were pure, but neither her prejudices nor her reasoning powers suffered her to be at all times consistent. Still few knew her that did not love her, and none were heard to say aught against her breeding, her morals, or her disposition. (33)

The description’s major claims are qualified to the extent of saying very little. In addition to this structural problem, it is impossible to verify these claims through prior action or the plot’s forward progress. Eventually, characters begin to acquire distinction through dialogue and action, leading Cooper’s wife to conclude that the book was “better at the

end than at the beginning.”<sup>63</sup> But then, Cooper admitted to a lack of direction early in writing claiming, “*no plot* was fixed upon until the first Vol. was half done.”<sup>64</sup> The first half of the novel manifests this lack of direction as a misplacement of descriptive emphasis and general repetitiousness.

Yet by the novel’s second half characters and settings acquire heft. A promising moment earlier in the text between Emily and Mrs. Wilson builds into a nuanced sense of connection. Chapter sixteen thus opens with Emily’s observation:

“I am sorry, aunt, Mr. Denbigh is not rich,” said Emily to Mrs. Wilson, after they had retired in the evening, almost unconscious of what she uttered. The latter looked at her niece in surprise, at a remark so abrupt, and one so very different from the ordinary train of Emily’s reflections, as she required an explanation. (113)

Emily’s inner life is implied here, as is her history with Mrs. Wilson, and the latter’s demand of an explanation builds their relationship through action rather than assertion.

This combination of effects is repeated later in the novel:

The day succeeding the arrival of the Moseleys at the seat of their ancestors, Mrs. Wilson observed Emily silently putting on her pelisse, and walking out unattended by either of the domestics of any of the family. There was a peculiar melancholy in her air and manner, which inclined the cautious aunt to suspect that her charge was bent on the indulgence of some ill-judged weakness; more particularly, as the direction she took led to the arbor, a theater in which Denbigh had been so conspicuous an actor. Hastily throwing a cloak over her own shoulders, Mrs. Wilson followed Emily with the double purpose of ascertaining her views, and if necessary, of interposing her own authority against the repetition of similar excursions. (261)

This passage is less economical than the first, but it works to a similar effect by suggesting Emily’s emotional interiority and revealing her godmother’s controlling character, particularly in her hasty pursuit of her niece (“throwing a cloak over her own shoulders”). In a novel that does little in the way of creating a sense of setting or

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<sup>63</sup> Beard, James Franklin, ed. *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper, Vol. I* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 43.

<sup>64</sup> Beard, 66.

necessity of action, this moment is notable for both. The scene is the arbor where Emily has talked with Denbigh, and the necessity of action is Mrs. Wilson's obsessive concern with the emotional state of her charge. Thus action follows from concrete and character-specific traits at a particular point in time and in a particular place. Rather than presenting dialogue without meaningful action, the second half of the novel turns to character-driven plot, allowing turns in action and speech to emerge from the relationships between characters as well as their own traits.

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of Cooper's emerging novelistic style occurs at the end of the work, as Denbigh (revealed to be the Earl of Pendennyss, much to Mrs. Wilson's delight) recounts the history of his father and uncle. At the end of chapter forty, Pendennyss offers to explain the necessity of the disguise he adopted with the Moseleys:

As much of the explanation of the mystery of our tales, involved in the foregoing paragraphs, we may be allowed to relate in our own language, what Pendennyss made his friends acquainted with at different times, and in a manner suitable to the subject and his situation. (282)

Yet the language of the following chapter, while markedly different from the rest of the novel, bears little upon Pendennyss's wish to conceal his identity so as to better assess whether he could impress Emily in the absence of rank and wealth. It opens much in the way of a later Cooper novel:

It was at the close of that war which lost this country the wealthiest and most populous of her American colonies, that a fleet of ships were returning from their service amongst the islands of the New World, to seek for their worn out and battered hulks, and equally weakened crews, the repairs and comforts of England and home. (283)

The chapter's opening does what *Precaution* largely fails to do by imagining a context from which action and dialogue unfold logically rather than as a matter of force. At the close of the American Revolution, a fleet of ships moves toward England, and on those ships two officers are negotiating the marriage of their respective children. Though the

negotiation proves the beginning of the unhappy careers of Pendennyss's father and uncle, it is less significant than the concrete matter of the war and the fleet itself, which enables narration "in our own language." This opening explains the opinion of William Cullen Bryant, among others, that *Precaution* contained "a promise of the powers which its author afterwards put forth."<sup>65</sup> Yet this sense of written place, which would bring Cooper the fame he desired, evolved through the exercise of writing moral fiction. Though his later style would align him with Scott more closely than with Edgeworth, his decision to write a moral novel and the realism he developed therein suggest that the genre was considered a legitimate field for exploring a social reality still shaped by ideas about universal rights, behaviors, and imperatives.<sup>66</sup>

Cooper's career writing moral fiction did not end with *Precaution*, despite the fact that he was completing *The Spy* at the same time, and his long overlooked tales evince his growing sense of the importance of setting as well as a more proficient sense of irony's moral potential. Initially begun as a favor to help publisher Charles Wiley, who brought out *The Spy*, what became *Tales for Fifteen* (1823) was originally advertised by Wiley as "*American Tales*, by a Lady, viz. Imagination—Heart—Matter—Manner—Matter and Manner."<sup>67</sup> James Beard has suggested that Cooper's decision to proceed with the tales, concealing his identity, derived from his being at a crossroads in his literary ambitions. Though *Precaution* met with some contemporary success, Cooper felt *The Spy* was both a

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<sup>65</sup> "W.C. Bryant's Discourse on the Life, Genius, and Writings of James Fenimore Cooper. Delivered at Metropolitan Hall, N.Y. February 25, 1852" in Cooper, *Precaution* 9.

<sup>66</sup> In reflecting on his success with the genre of the moral novel in *Precaution* Cooper remarks: "Anyone who reviews such a work [should] be a *christian*. It is not Cœlebs but it is in this respect but little behind Discipline—plot much better [...]." Beard, 66.

<sup>67</sup> James Beard, introduction, *Tales for Fifteen* (1823; Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1959), ix.

better book and less secure of favorable reception.<sup>68</sup> The tale “Imagination” reflects his sense that an American setting might be combined with the act of moralizing to produce something as popular as Opie’s *Simple Tales* (1807) and *Tales of Real Life* (1813). It also relies on irony for its pedagogy, suggesting that Cooper still had Austen in mind as a model and the narrative tools to better approximate her style.<sup>69</sup>

“Imagination” ridicules the excessive indulgence of its titular subject by following the friendship of Anna Miller and Julia Warren as it comes to its natural close. Fellows at school, the girls are separated when Anna’s family moves to the Midwest. The disparity in their social positions is revealed ironically through Anna’s letters to Julia:

I do think there is no pleasure under heaven equal to that of wearing things that belong to your friend. Don’t you remember how fond I was of wearing your clothes at school, though you were not so fond of changing as myself; but that was no wonder, for pa’s stinginess kept me so shabbily dressed, that I was ashamed to let you be seen in them.<sup>70</sup>

The letter reveals aspects of Anna’s personality (rather than announcing them to the reader, the primary mode of characterization in *Precaution*)—specifically, her dependence on Julia and the difference in their class positions. Julia does not see this disparity or Anna’s opportunism and she defends her friend to her family using language that would have been familiar to Cooper’s readers from contemporary conversations about biblical evidence. Asked to define the “innate evidence of worth” that she ascribes to Anna’s character, Julia replies, “Why, a conviction that another possesses all that you esteem yourself, and is discovered by congenial feelings and natural sympathies”

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<sup>68</sup> Beard, introduction viii.

<sup>69</sup> As Beard notes, the tale’s “satiric awareness” formed an important part of Cooper’s later works. Introduction, xii.

<sup>70</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, “Imagination,” in Beard, 23. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically.



(18).<sup>71</sup> Yet part of Anna's appeal is the space she allows for Julia to construct her merits. When pressed on her preference for Anna over her cousin Katherine, Julia asserts that the latter's virtues were "so evident that nothing was left dependent on innate evidence"; the narrator continues, "Our heroine seldom dwelt with pleasure on any character that did not give scope to her imagination" (50). Relying on the discrepancy between what the reader can see in Anna's letters and Julia's idea of her, the tale ironically ridicules her imaginative excesses.

The joke acquires a more serious dimension as Anna begins to write Julia about "Edward Stanley," an acquaintance who, in hearing of Julia's virtues, falls in love with her. Deciding to refer to him as "Antonio," Julia is gratified by the idea of his admiration—more gratified than by the reality of her cousin's affections. Anna describes Antonio's plan to follow Julia on her family trip to Niagara Falls and surrounding areas. Julia becomes convinced that he is their driver, who is possessed of one eye and roughly fifty years of age:

He had ingeniously adopted the name of Anthony, as resembling in sound the one she herself had given him in her letters. This he undoubtedly had learnt from Anna—and then Sanford was very much like Stanley—his patch, his dress, his air—every thing about him united to confirm her impressions. (95)

The tale indulges in several additional moments at Julia's expense before she reaches Anna's home to discover that Antonio is entirely a fiction—a "man of straw" (122). With the scales fallen, Julia is finally aware of her driver's deficiencies: "While resting her foot on the step of the carriage, about to enter it, Julia, whose looks were depressed from shame, saw a fluid that was discolored with tobacco fall on her shoe and soil her

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<sup>71</sup> Contemporary theologians regularly cited "internal evidence" as proof of the Bible's veracity, which referred to the internal consistency of the text, and the consistency of biblical truths with experience. Holifield, 6. Julia's saturation in this language reads as a subtle jab at these arguments and related discourses of moral sensibility, on which Cooper nevertheless continued to rely.

stocking” (123). Freed from the tyranny of her imaginings, Julia now appreciates her cousin; the tale concludes:

Our travellers returned to the city by the way of Montreal and Lake Champlain; nor was it until Julia had been the happy wife of Charles Weston for over a year, that she could summon resolution to own that she had once been in love, like thousands of her sex, “with a man of straw”!  
(124)

Cooper’s timing in writing *Tales for Fifteen* is significant since it is at this moment that moral fiction was losing its general relevance. Later expressions of the impulse to combine literary narrative—with its capacity for complex psychological characterization, descriptive realism, and cumulative plot structure—and morality would draw upon devotional precepts and biblical themes in a more explicit manner. The open field in which Cooper and Brown experimented with moral fiction thus became more specialized, with evangelical tract tales and best-selling Christian novels taking up the imperative to combine sentiment and narrative, though with a more pronounced emphasis on biblical ideas. Historical romance replaced the moral novel in preeminence during the early antebellum period, but the desire that moral novels embodied to combine advances in contemporary philosophy with ideas about universal behavioral precepts persisted to become more firmly spiritual and biblical.

## Chapter Two: Form, Time, Truth: The Evangelical Tract Tale

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation *à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.

~Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin’s irony raises a question about narrative. Is it possible for a redeemed mankind to write history? As narratives, histories require the selection and arrangement of incidents: plot orders time in a human vision that stands in for God’s order. Hayden White has explained how narrative histories emerged at a moment when a temporal order arranged by divine provenance could no longer be assumed.<sup>2</sup> The certainty of eschatological time was replaced by the created order of narrative plot, which carried the threat of being nothing more than a human vision.

For writers in nineteenth-century America, questions about time and providence motivated experiments with literary form. Writers committed to a secular idea of history used narratives to manifest what Fredric Jameson has described as the inexorable form of

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 254.

<sup>2</sup> In his essay “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” White draws the following distinction between a chronicle and a history: In a chronicle events are recorded on particular dates, but without an explicitly articulated or necessary connection to one another, whereas in a history events are connected by a logic that is no longer merely implicit. “Now, the capacity to envision a set of events as belonging to the same order of meaning requires some metaphysical principle by which to translate difference into similarity. In other words, it requires a ‘subject’ common to all of the referents of the various sentences that register events as having occurred. If such a subject exists [in the *Annals of St. Gall*], it is the ‘Lord’ whose ‘years’ are treated as manifestations of His power to cause the events that occur in them.” Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 16.

history.<sup>3</sup> Religious writers used narrative plot—particularly fictional plot—for different purposes, to reveal time’s operation on multiple levels, historical and eternal. Using plot to reveal the invisible forces at work in life-like settings and scenarios, popular religious fiction was a means for envisioning a providential order larger than history that determined its operations.<sup>4</sup>

In this discussion, I will consider the creative aspects of plot in antebellum evangelical tract tales.<sup>5</sup> Read inside and outside evangelical circles, these tales preceded and inspired the religious novels of the 1850s.<sup>6</sup> It has been difficult to trace the significance of tract tales and their relationship to the popular Christian novels of the period because of the tracts’ ephemerality and brevity. Ranging anywhere from four to

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<sup>3</sup> He is tracing a line of thinking from Spinoza through Althusser that posits history as the “formal effect” of an “absent cause.” Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) 102.

<sup>4</sup> Emplotment is Paul Ricœur’s term for the activity of the plot, which consists in a poetic “grasping together” of the heterogeneous elements derived from the world into a meaningful whole through both the arrangement of these elements in a chronological frame, as well as the chronological activity of the reader who actualizes a story by following it. See Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol I., trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), particularly chapter three. This double emphasis on poesis and chronology is what separates Ricœur from critics like Roland Barthes. Ricœur maintained that by relying upon “achronological” codes in order to interpret narrative, Barthes failed to understand the fundamentally temporal character of written form as it reflects and structures the lived experience of time. Ricœur, “The Human Experience of Time and Narrative,” *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 104.

<sup>5</sup> As a material form, the tract was distinguishable because it was usually printed in a duodecimo format and bound without a cover (if published singly), running anywhere from four to thirty pages. Single tracts were often bound together in paper- or leather-bound volumes to form collections that looked like books. Longer tracts (from 100 to 400 pages) were normally bound with paper or leather and issued as small volumes. The heterogeneity in binding practices arose in part from the fact that tract societies sold pages both bound and unbound, signifying that binding was less of a generic signifier than the form and content of the pages. The first annual report of the Pennsylvania branch of the American Tract Society states, for instance, that a subscription of two dollars a year will yield 1,000 pages of tracts. With the lesser subscription of a dollar a reader could receive either 600 pages or one bound volume and 120 pages unbound. *First Annual Report of the Pennsylvania Branch of the American Tract Society with Lists of Auxiliaries and Benefactors* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1828).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the ascendancy of the religious or doctrinal novel as a mid-century phenomenon, see Cathy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David S. Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); and Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

two hundred pages, tract tales were often published unbound, although longer tales in were often listed in contemporary library holdings with novels and romances. Nina Baym has described length as the signal feature distinguishing novels from shorter forms such as tales during this period.<sup>7</sup> Yet in the early years of the republic, tract tales were frequently classified with novels as fictive works.<sup>8</sup> Tract tales were thus a distinct part of a literary scene that included novels and romances, sharing with these genres a common identity as fiction.<sup>9</sup> Since length cannot address the question of how tracts differed from non-religious novels and romances, I will describe them using plot. In their reflexive use of plot, tract tales were distinguishable from non-religious fiction because they used the internal construction of a fictional world to reveal the larger forces at work in history.

In thinking about tract tales' plots, I do not aim to undo generic distinctions as much as to illuminate a creative aspect of religious writing that has been previously overlooked. The contemporary novel and the tract tale both worked through a similar, Aristotelian conception of the purpose of plot.<sup>10</sup> Tales rendered time compressed to

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<sup>7</sup> Baym 65.

<sup>8</sup> In a sample of library lists from antebellum Philadelphia, only one of which was explicitly denominational, I found that over ninety percent stocked tracts and/or longer moral tales like Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809) or Maria Edgeworth's *Moral Tales for Young People* (1805). For more on the connection between religious publishing and mass market fiction see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); "The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835," *Journalism Monographs* 88 (1984): 1-30. Nord's research suggests that evangelical tract publication in the early nation actually set technological precedents for the development of mass market fiction later in the century.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Davitt Bell has argued that the primary distinction in contemporary thought was between fiction and what "conventional thought took to be 'fact.'" Yet fictive narratives that reproduced moral or doctrinal truths were also perceived to be dealing with fact. Bell's conviction that Scottish thought in America was inherently secular prevents him from taking account of the Aristotelian vein in the religious fiction and fiction of social morality in this period. Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) xii, 7.

<sup>10</sup> The idea that written form should reproduce external truths derived from a divine origin is much like the "ideological grammar" that Myra Jehlen has used to describe American thinking about the fact of the American continent itself. Jehlen writes that Americans did not explicitly articulate the idea that the continent incarnated liberal individualism. Instead, she explains, "I mean rather that an idea of incarnation can be seen to organize American self-consciousness as grammar organizes speech, without specifying its content. In that sense, this book might be best taken, in contrast to, say, a dictionary or a reader, as an

reveal patterns or types of divine things, while novels offered readers a sense of the totality of historical time by representing patterns in history.<sup>11</sup> By rendering time in literary form, tales and novels offered readers a vantage point outside of history. Yet from a religious perspective, the difference between literary form and history endowed the former with pedagogical capacities, since it could reveal truths that were not visible in the world.<sup>12</sup> Literary form was also pedagogical in the sense that it prompted readers to return to the world with new spiritual commitments. Emplotment, Paul Ricœur's term for the resolution of events drawn from the world into the meaningful whole of the plot, depends upon the return of plot to the world in the life of the reader. Evangelical tales offered models for rethinking the historical world from a spiritual perspective, making their creative literary effects significant in their own right, but not conceivable apart from their pedagogical function. Literary form was both radically free in this context to represent something other than historical fact but also inextricably bound to manifesting immaterial moral truths.

In describing how religious tract writers used plot to materialize invisible spiritual truths, this discussion will ask what politics such narratives made possible. Because of

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ideological grammar." *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) 21.

<sup>11</sup> This is the function of the type in realist fiction as Georg Lukács describes it: "The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type a type is not its average quality, nor its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentation of their extremes, rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs." Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, and Gorki, and others*, trans. Edith Bone (London: Hillway Publishing Co., 1950) 6. On the difference between religious and social realism see Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> In other words, literary form was not an expression of autonomy as it was in early German aesthetic theory. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "Sentimental Aesthetics," *American Literature* 76.3: 495-523. On the relation between autonomy and critique see Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004): 13-38.

the evangelical focus on personal piety, American antebellum audiences read a wide array of reprinted tracts from other nations rather than conceiving piety as a strictly national practice.<sup>13</sup> Although the trope of Protestant pilgrimage is often connected to nationalist projects such as Manifest Destiny, my research suggests that evangelicals in this period saw the nation as part a larger cosmic frame that permitted forms of connection along other lines.<sup>14</sup> To borrow Gregory S. Jackson's recent terminology, readers of evangelical tract narratives saw themselves as "historically grounded" subjects with a "transhistorical agency" that was transnational as well.<sup>15</sup>

With respect to antebellum America's central political problem—racial prejudice—evangelical creative writing in both white and black circles had a political agenda that is often misconstrued because of its differences from politics today.<sup>16</sup> Although a growing body of critical work among scholars of African American literature has opened discussion of the political potentiality of Protestant Christianity for black

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<sup>13</sup> Meredith McGill has demonstrated that reprinting British works in America arose from a complicated relationship between legal possibility and cultural desire. The lack of international copyright in America led to the tendency to reprint British works, yet McGill argues that a powerful "culture" of reprinting made this practice not contingent but a conscious system in which contemporaries were invested. Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 4. The driving motivation behind American evangelical reprints of works from other international enclaves was the imagination of a transnational community of believers. By theorizing such a community, I am offering a qualification of Benedict Anderson's thesis concerning the ascendancy of nation in an era of religious eclipse. According to Anderson, the seventeenth century saw vast economic changes—the rise of empiricism and "discovery," and the development of rapid communication—which caused a division to arise between cosmology and history. This situation brought about the need to connect "fraternity, power, and time" in new ways. *Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991). Yet fraternity, power, and time continued to be linked in ways that thought around as well as within nation.

<sup>14</sup> I do not wish to contend that a providential model for thinking about the American nation was unimportant. But American evangelicals in this period believed they belonged to a global Christian network, evidence of which circulated in the contemporary press in the form of Bible distribution reports and updates on tract production in other countries. National identity was clearly significant, but it was viewed by evangelical contemporaries as a subset of an international evangelical community.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson 145.

<sup>16</sup> There was no consensus in mainstream Protestant tract publication over the issue: publishers such as the ATS and the ASSU were castigated in abolitionist circles for their refusal to represent slavery as a moral wrong, while the Tract Association of Friends published works that argued explicitly for the humanity of African American subjects. I will discuss some of the problems that black readers had with both types of works below.

writers in this period, popular evangelical writing in African American circles remains understudied because of its apparent lack of a political agenda.<sup>17</sup> This chapter will describe the tracts that circulated in antebellum Philadelphia's black evangelical community in libraries, book depositories, and the pages of the *Christian Recorder*, the newspaper arm of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Black readers engaged with popular tract tales about impoverished white Britons and triumphant biblical characters, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Thomas à Kempis's *De imitatione Christi* (1427), and Richard Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650). This evidence suggests that African American religious readers were interested in cultivating a form of religious self-sufficiency that was spiritual, personal, and political, to borrow Joycelyn Moody's configuration.<sup>18</sup> This form of self-sufficiency was always in critical relation with the conversation about slavery and race prejudice, and it allowed for positions on these issues that challenged historical facts from a spiritual perspective. The political dimension of evangelical tract tales, specifically their use of literary plot, inhered in their evaluation of history from the dual perspectives of a commitment to eternity and the belief in the transformative practices of personal piety.<sup>19</sup>

To describe how plot worked in the tract tales, it is necessary to understand the central pattern they were written to represent. The idea of life as a pilgrimage imitative of

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<sup>17</sup> As compared with the more overt religious and political thinking of figures like Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and David Walker, for instance.

<sup>18</sup> Joycelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001) 17.

<sup>19</sup> Saba Mahmood's study of women and Islam has proved central to my thinking, as she uses the concept of bodily religious practice to challenge the categories of agency and autonomy as they have been conceived in modernity. Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Michel de Certeau's work on everyday practices also conceives the activity of the subject in a way that eschews the reflexive rationality that relies on the place and the name. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).



Christ was part of Western Christian thinking beginning with the Church Fathers.<sup>20</sup>

Gregory S. Jackson notes that in medieval Christianity the pilgrimage was conceived as a literal and metaphoric journey that occurred at the levels of the believer's thoughts and deeds.<sup>21</sup> The Reformation extended the idea of life as pilgrimage by theologically codifying the significance of everyday life for the practice of faith.<sup>22</sup> It also fueled the rise of a print culture in Western Europe as Martin Luther's call for a vernacular Bible prompted a demand for personal Bibles.<sup>23</sup> Manuals for godly living and other pedagogical materials also filled the gap left by the turn away from clerical dependence. In this context, writing the life as pilgrimage was not a creative act but a useful one, a means of reducing life's incidents into a pattern for others to follow—a pattern that represented God's determination of individual life.

The idea that life narratives were representations of God's order dominated Protestant narrative production well into the nineteenth century. Yet these narratives of life as pilgrimage lent themselves to creative elaboration since their pedagogical value did not depend as much on the historical truth of their detail as it did upon the reflection

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<sup>20</sup> According to Eric Auerbach, figural realism introduces a way of looking at time that undoes the horizontal temporality of classical thinking. In linking events as promise and fulfillment through the medium of a transcendent and eternal plan, figural thinking introduces another order of time altogether. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 73-76; Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), particularly chapter one.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson 106-107.

<sup>22</sup> The result of extending the activity of the spirit further into the affairs of the world has been most famously explored by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In the same vein as Weber's analysis, Michael McKeon notes the effects of Bunyan's modern allegory in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678): "In fact, the early novelists can be seen as struggling toward a form that would defetishize the spirit by freeing it from the realm of the ideal, whence it might descend to inhabit the world of human relations, the material ground on which the real battle against the deadening materialization of the spirit would have to be fought out in future times. And from this perspective, in its putative self-sufficiency Bunyan's literal narrative enacts a positive and preservative secularization and affirms not the destruction, but the greater glory, of the life of the spirit; not the enchantment but the disenchantment of the world." Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 312.

<sup>23</sup> Febvre, Lucien and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, trans. David Gerard (London: Verso, 1984).

of a divine pattern in narrative occurrence. Rather than positing a false consciousness in this form of representation, my discussion details the different forms that emerged in this creative and pedagogical practice of narrative elaboration. For religious writers interested in describing human life as a pilgrimage towards God, an invented detail mattered less than its overall function in making divine meaning clear. For the writers and readers I will consider, truth was the tenor of represented reality, since reality was inherently metaphorical.<sup>24</sup> Truth did not derive from the literary vehicle although—and this is the paradox that interests me—religious contemporaries did recognize how literary narrative worked. In what follows, I will outline the contextual reasons that prevented the emergence of a theory of literary creativity among evangelical writers despite their use of invention in narrative plot.

One reason that creative representation was not the primary focus for antebellum evangelical writers was the traditional primacy of the pilgrim over the pilgrimage in Western Christian thought. This represented a shift from classical thinking about literary form—specifically, the primacy of action over character. For example, Aristotle put action above character in the *Poetics* by suggesting that the fate of a character depended upon the unfolding of plot. The revelation of character was part of the larger work of the drama, which manifested universals in the course of developing action.<sup>25</sup> Following the

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<sup>24</sup> Jackson describes the difference between the synecdochical representation in the realist novel, which works within a unified ontological and temporal register, and the inherently metaphorical nature of religious literary representation as follows: “The realist novel thus tends to work by selecting representative cases to reveal a social truth, to describe particulars in order to reveal the truth about the whole. Homiletic exercises, on the other hand, do not posit absolutes in or about the social world. Instead, they work more through metaphor, through the recognition of the similarity between two different realms altogether. That is, they engage the material through experiential templates in an effort to illuminate the spiritual conditions of the real that reside beyond the empirical.” Jackson 13.

<sup>25</sup> Kathy Eden notes that for Aristotle the function of the eikon or the true image was pedagogical, to instruct, delight, and move the audience. Kathy Eden, *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) 71. Paul Ricœur notes that the universals embodied by the

turn to Christianity, emphasis shifted away from the plot to the religious subject. Kathy Eden describes this transition in Augustine's revision of Plato. According to Augustine, man thinks in images and is himself an image, the *imago Dei*. Universal truth is manifest in man himself rather than in the course of his actions. Eden describes the difference between Augustine's notion of character and the older Aristotelian idea of plot as follows:

The relation between God and the human soul, however, can only be perfected in this life through the imitation of Christ—an active participation in certain qualities such as mercy, compassion, and humility, rather than a quantitative correspondence of parts.<sup>26</sup>

The transition from plot to character would find a new expression in Reformation Christianity. The Reformers' injunction to bring spirituality into all aspects of human existence had the effect of making aspects of everyday life the field for *imitatio Christi*. God ordained human life and each moment was part of the totality of living toward Christ. The life lived in the spirit of the *imitatio* was thus the only plot which mattered, rendering constructed plots unnecessary.

And yet, Reformed Protestants constructed numerous plots as tools for self-reflection and self-analysis.<sup>27</sup> According to Charles Taylor, Reformed theology's codification of the spiritual agency of the individual arose from a turn toward everyday life in the later middle ages, as divine will was conceived as working through human agents rather than making direct impact on the world. Taylor terms the human capacity to realize divine purpose "instrumental reason," an epistemology that eventually prompted

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Aristotelian plot were always concerned with the practical realms of ethics and politics, and so in this way they differed from the universal dimension referenced by figures in later Christian thought. *Time and Narrative* 41.

<sup>26</sup> Eden 140.

<sup>27</sup> The classic study of this phenomenon remains Leopold Damrosch, *God's Plots and Man's Stories: Studies in Fictional Imagination from Milton to Fielding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Descartes' "cogito ergo sum."<sup>28</sup> Reasoning entailed a faith in human judgment that eventually brought the Western Church to the crisis of the Reformation. For these reasons, Reformed Protestantism thrived with rationalism and empiricism since it too privileged the thinking mind. Life writing in the Protestant tradition represented the application of the reflexive capacity of rational thought to the problem of life as the *imitatio Christi*. The essential function of the Protestant and particularly the Calvinist life narrative was to reproduce the course of life in miniature so that it could be analyzed for signs of God's grace and favor.<sup>29</sup> According to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, human life reflected a divine will or determination, which was manifest in life narratives in a reduced and therefore legible form.

In addition to being overshadowed by this inherited focus on character, the importance of literary plot was also obscured in the antebellum evangelical context by a focus on readers. Paul J. Griffiths has argued that religious writing does not manifest the aesthetic autonomy celebrated by literary critics because it is oriented towards the world and the ethical activity of the reader.<sup>30</sup> Narratives in the Protestant life-writing tradition were aids in the *imitatio Christi*; readers valued them not because they were innovative, but because innovation of historical detail served as an effective model for how to live as a Christian in the contemporary world.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, variation in represented detail had been a part of writing the pilgrim's progress toward Christ since the late medieval morality

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) 98. He also traces the rise of the modern reflexive capacity in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972) 227-28..

<sup>30</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> On the use of contemporary narrative detail in the nineteenth-century homiletic novel as a model for modern pilgrimage see Gregory S. Jackson's reading of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1869) in *The Word and Its Witness*, pages 125-150.

plays and early modern allegories such as *Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>32</sup> Variations in plot detail in Protestant-life writing were pedagogical goads to activity in the world rather than autonomously creative innovations.<sup>33</sup>

Emphasis on character and use allowed for a relatively seamless transition in Protestant life writing from diegesis to mimesis in the early national and antebellum periods. Gregory S. Jackson has described the flourishing of parabiblical materials in the antebellum period as a response to the circumstances of the new nation. With the Revolution came a greater sense of self-reliance and self-determination while the conditions of religious life in the new nation—disestablishment and the rise of new sects and denominations—fostered spiritual self-guidance.<sup>34</sup> Conditions for print production also improved following the Revolution, resulting in increased publication output and a wider array of available print genres.<sup>35</sup> Traditional spiritual autobiography flourished in this context and it was joined by a new genre of life narrative about exemplary fictive subjects.<sup>36</sup> The early decades of the nation thus witnessed a transition from a stringent

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<sup>32</sup> For another look at a similar reading process, see Janice A. Radway's study of romance reading. Romances are valued by the subjects of Radway's study because they vary a well-defined set of paradigms, making the measure of literary achievement a creative adherence to pattern and type. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>33</sup> Here, too, we can see the religious roots of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, with its insistence that the text always returns to the world in the form of the altered horizons of the reader.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson 22-23. Studies of religious practice during the Second Great Awakening by Joyce Appleby and Nathan O. Hatch also trace the emergence of this ideology of self-reliance. Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). For more on disestablishment see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), particularly chapter nine. For more on how these ideas resonated with women, leading to the rise of female preaching, see Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, *The History of the Book in America: Volume I, The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Of course, the practice of claiming historical precedent for the subjects of tract tales continued. Legh Richmond's best-selling tale *The Dairyman's Daughter* (1814) inspired much debate over the facticity of its subject, as in "Are Tracts Fiction?," *The Religious Intelligencer*, 8 Sept. 1827: 12, 15; "Tracts No

Calvinist skepticism of literary creation to a cautious appreciation for what fictional narrative could do for religious instruction.<sup>37</sup>

Yet there was always a complicated negotiation in evangelical circles around the activity of literary creation. Many looked to the parable as an acceptable precedent for fictive moral writing. Jesus had used historically relevant tales to illustrate moral precepts, and evangelical writers and publishers argued that their tales were undertaken in this spirit. While the nature of the parable is in many ways Aristotelian, relying on the turns of narrative plot to make truth evident, antebellum evangelicals emphatically stressed the Platonic dimensions of their modern parables in a way that prevented an acknowledgement of the work of literary form. For instance, the editors at the American Sunday School Union (ASSU)—one of the two largest tract producers in the country, along with the American Tract Society (ATS)—make the following distinction between the form of a tale and its message:

The principle we would maintain is simply this—that the leading subject of every Sabbath-school library book should present distinctly to view one or more of the great principles of the Christian religion; and it should be wrought into the volume and exhibited in its various bearings, so that when the child has properly read the book, the truth and importance of this great principle shall make a deeper impression than any thing else about the volume.<sup>38</sup>

“Any thing else” is plot, character, dialogue, and denouement—the matter of narrative.

While the editors maintain that these mechanisms are necessary to convey the “great principles of the Christian religion,” they remain secondary in this analysis to the

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Fiction,” *The Religious Intelligencer*, 17 Nov., 1827: 12, 25. My argument is that another form of life narrative emerged at this time which makes no claim to historical precedent and that it coexisted with narratives that did make such claims.

<sup>37</sup> Crucial to this burgeoning sense of appreciation was the importation of British evangelical writing such as Hannah More’s series of Cheap Repository Tracts, and works like Maria Edgeworth’s *Moral Tales for Young People* (1805).

<sup>38</sup> American Sunday School Union, *Considerations of the Uses and Abuses of Sunday-School Libraries* (Philadelphia: Rackliff & King, 1838) 8.

principles themselves. Another way to read this statement would be to say that the editors do not dismiss plot as much as they take it for granted. According to them, while the vehicle conveys the message, the message does not depend upon the vehicle. Although the plots of evangelicals' modern parables worked in an Aristotelian fashion their perceived value inhered in a Platonic transmission of religious principle. The importance of literary form in evangelical writing was thus assumed without being acknowledged or lauded.

Even the staunchest critics of religious fiction recognized that all illustrations of religious principle required inventive vehicles or plots. In a vehement warning against the growing numbers of religious novels, evangelical Episcopal clergyman Charles Wesley Andrews inveighed against the fictitious "vehicle," contrasting it with that of the parable:

The parable is a method of teaching in which, as the word imports, one thing is thrown alongside of another thing to illustrate it. Usually some Gospel truth is hereby illustrated from some visible facts of the natural world. In these short illustrations, commonly extending to but a few lines, the reader does not take the facts, or incidents employed as themselves the truth which is intended to be taught. In this respect they are akin to the fable, where there is a perfect consciousness of the distinctness of the vehicle from the intended lesson. Whereas, in the religious novel, the doctrine, or moral intended to be taught, is so perfectly blended with its fictitious vehicle, that the distinction is not only lost sight of, but the fictitious vehicle itself puts in a claim of credence, which claim, if resisted, destroys the chief interest of the book.<sup>39</sup>

Although Andrews wants to distinguish between the parable and the novel, they share analogous qualities in employing vehicles or plots with characters. Later in his treatise he claims that allegory also belongs to this group since it too possesses a degree of fiction:

"The veil of fiction which allegory employs is so thin, that the mind constantly penetrates

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Wesley Andrews, *Religious Novels: An Argument Against Their Use*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph, 1856) 9.

it, and is engaged with the truth and not its vehicle.”<sup>40</sup> Fiction exists in a continuum with parable and allegory in Andrews’ analysis, differing only in the extent to which the vehicle is developed. Although Andrews’ argument implies that the developmental potential of the plot is present in every form of religious illustration, he cannot celebrate plot as a form of invention because it entails a threat to religious representation: the overtaking of religious truth by narrative creation. All transmission of truth through narrative form carried with it this threat of the creative work of plot. For conservative critics like Andrews, this made the religious novel a pernicious and ambiguous extension of acceptable representational practices.

The contemporary evangelical urge to celebrate the precepts conveyed in writing rather than writing itself derived from the influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy on antebellum American Protestant thought. Francis Hutcheson had amended John Locke’s empiricism by applying absolute notions of right and wrong to sensory reactions, designating this response an indwelling moral sense. Gregg Camfield has described how Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Archibald Alison, Thomas Reid, and Hugh Blair enabled a reclamation of the value art had lost during the Reformation by theorizing it as a means by which right moral feelings could be produced.<sup>41</sup> Yet Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has observed that despite this newfound appreciation of art aesthetics remained merely functional for Scottish philosophers concerned with Platonic moral absolutes.<sup>42</sup> Most Americans were exposed to Scottish aesthetic theory through Hugh Blair’s *Lectures*

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<sup>40</sup> Andrews 16.

<sup>41</sup> Gregg Camfield, “The Moral Aesthetics of Sentimentality: A Missing Key to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 43.3 (1988): 324-325.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “Sentimental Aesthetics,” *American Literature* 76.3 (2004): 507.



on *Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), a work intended for the instruction of the young.<sup>43</sup>

The appeal of the *Lectures* to evangelical readers and writers is not difficult to discern

thanks to the key role intuition played in Blair's definition of aesthetic understanding.

Following Jonathan Edwards, evangelicals took intuition to be the key faculty by which

divine excellency was recognizable.<sup>44</sup> Blair similarly makes taste an intuitive and

immediate appreciation of beauty:

It is not merely through a discovery of the understanding or a deduction of argument, that the mind receives pleasure from a beautiful prospect or a fine poem. Such objects often strike us intuitively, and make a strong impression, when we are unable to assign the reasons of our being pleased. They sometimes strike in the same manner the philosopher and the peasant; the boy and the man.<sup>45</sup>

Although the beautiful object provokes an intuitive recognition of its value in the viewer,

the truth of beauty is not immanent in the object. Indeed, the *Lectures* maintain a general

argument that truth is autonomous from its vehicle while at the same time providing a

detailed description of how truth is conveyed in writing. In a later lecture Blair writes, "In

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<sup>43</sup>The ubiquity of the text is reflected in library lists and personal memoirs of the period, indicating that Blair's work was read by the elite as well as by scholars of humbler origins. The lectures were intended to be accessible; they were written, as Blair notes, for "the initiation of youth into the study of belles lettres, and of composition." Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1819; Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1993) 3. The impact the lectures had on generations of learners makes sense in the early national reading climate described by Cathy N. Davidson in *Revolution and the Word*. Due to the rise of increased opportunities for learning during this period there existed a wide array of readers operating at different levels of what she terms "literateness." *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 59.

<sup>44</sup>In *A Divine and Supernatural Light* (1734) Edwards explains that divine light imparts the ability to correctly perceive the excellency of divine things through an immediate and incontrovertible sense of their divinity. There is a beauty in these things, he claims, "that is so divine and godlike, that is greatly and evidently distinguishing of them from things merely human, or that men are the inventors and authors of; a glory that is so high and great, that when clearly seen, commands assent to their divinity, and reality. When there is an actual and lively discovery of this beauty and excellency, it won't allow of any such thought as that it is an human work, or the fruit of men's invention. This evidence, that they, that are spiritually enlightened, have of the truth of the things of religion, is a kind of intuitive and immediate evidence." *A Divine and Supernatural Light in A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, eds. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 113.

Both Edwards and Blair follow John Locke, who defines intuition in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) as follows: "For if we will reflect on our own ways of Thinking, we shall find, that sometimes the Mind perceives the Agreement or Disagreement of two Ideas immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other: And this, I think, we may call *intuitive Knowledge*." *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 531.

<sup>45</sup> Blair 15-16.

general, in all good writing, the sublime lies in the thought, not in the words; and when the thought is truly noble, it will for the most part, clothe itself in a native dignity of language.”<sup>46</sup> Language does not make the beautiful or the good but offers a covering or container that does not shape truth in any fundamental way. Blair’s notion of language as a transparency through which ideas are visible resembles Andrews’ notion of the veil of fiction in allegory. Andrews’ critique thus belonged to a cultural context shaped by the work of Blair, Alison, and others that understood language as secondary to the truth that was visible through it.

Several generations of religious authors in America were influenced by Blair’s arguments concerning useful fiction and his distinction between the literary vehicle and truth.<sup>47</sup> In the *Lectures* he describes the “fictitious history” as a form that communicated important moral truths in a less elevated style than poetry or history:

In fact, fictitious histories, might be employed for very useful purposes. They furnish one of the best channels for conveying instruction, for painting human life and manners, for shewing the errors into which we are betrayed by our passions, for rendering virtue amiable and vice odious. The effect of well contrived stories, towards accomplishing these purposes, is stronger than any effect that can be produced by simple and naked instruction; and hence we find, that the wisest men in all ages, have more or less employed fables and fictions, as the vehicles of knowledge. These have ever been the basis of both epic and dramatic poetry. It is not, therefore, the nature of this sort of writing considered in itself, but the faulty manner of its execution, that can expose it to any contempt.<sup>48</sup>

Blair argues that narration should not obscure the moral a fictitious history seeks to

convey. Yet his discussion of the fictitious vehicle suggests the same problem as

Andrews’ description of the religious fable. The fictitious history in Blair’s definition

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<sup>46</sup> Blair 44.

<sup>47</sup> For more on Blair’s influence see Warren Guthrie, “The Development of Rhetorical Theory in America, 1635-1850,” *Speech Monographs* 15.1 (1948): 61-71; and David Lundberg and Henry F. May, “The Enlightened Reader in America,” *American Quarterly* 28.2 (Summer 1976): 262-293

<sup>48</sup> Blair 373. He cites *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gil Blas* as representative examples of the kind of works he means. Not coincidentally, both of these texts were represented in virtually every library list I consulted for Philadelphia between 1820 and 1850, including religious collections.

differs from “simple and naked instruction” by virtue of its plot, which makes it a “well contrived story.” A moral communicated in story form is unavoidably in the story—it cannot be separated from its medium. Blair gestures implicitly to this difficulty at the end of the passage, drawing a distinction between the “nature” of the fictitious history “considered in itself” and the “faulty manner of its execution.” The fault is not in the form but in the style of its usage, according to Blair. Yet style is the particular usage of form, so this distinction does not solve the problem. Instead of acknowledging the work of literary form that was implicitly necessary for the communication of a moral message in fiction, Blair and others following his lead would maintain that literary form played a necessary but passive role in communicating truth. Several generations of American writers would inherit this conviction that the truth conveyed by a fictitious history was separable from its literary form.

The threat of the fictitious history for critics of religious fiction inhered in the world it created through plot, which engaged the reader’s sympathies. By enticing readers with a world much like this one, fictitious histories ran the risk of interesting readers only in this world rather than the next. One reviewer from outside the evangelical community warned readers of the pernicious similarities between novels and tract tales. Published in the Dutch Reformed *Christian Intelligencer and Eastern Chronicle*, the review describes the passions incited by both forms:<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> In drawing this comparison, the reviewer departs from the standard position in the evangelical press that held tract tales and novels to be easily and readily distinguishable. The editor of the evangelical *Christian Diadem and Family Keepsake*, from which I will draw another example of a didactic tale, draws a distinction between novels and other forms of evangelical literature that is more the norm: “But the fashionable works of novels and romances are not only to be found on the tables of the votaries of worldly pleasures, but alas! to the burning shame of many of the professed followers of Christ, be it said, that too often they are found in their dwellings also. To counteract the influences of these irreligious works, shall be, as it ever has been, our greatest and first object.” Zephaniah Paten Hatch, “Doing Good,” *Christian Diadem and Family Keepsake* Vol. IV, Part II (1854): 32.

If it be the object of a tract writer to awaken the fears and influence the passions of a young person or a child they proceed in the same way that the writer of a novel does, to touch the sensibility and draw forth the sympathy of the reader.—The object of both is to enlist the passions in the favor of their hero or heroine.<sup>50</sup>

Sympathy arises in this description not as a result of narrative length, but from the quality of the reader's engagement with the protagonist. Following the work of Adam Smith, American contemporaries understood sympathy as putting oneself in the position of another, a comparison facilitated by convincing mimetic detail.<sup>51</sup> The reviewer suggests that the audience for tract tales and novels valued mimesis in similar ways since it allowed them to make comparisons between their own position and those portrayed in the narrative. I have already discussed the difference between the pilgrimage pattern tract tale readers expected and the different plots offered by contemporary novels. Yet this review points to the fact that both tract tale and novel readers engaged with a created world in narrative form. The most salient criterion for understanding how both genres engaged readers is therefore plot or the mechanism that built worlds in narrative form. Moving from a distinct beginning to end, plot created an arc of time distinct from lived time that was available for readers as a point of comparison to lived experience.

To understand how evangelicals used literary plot, it is necessary to identify the formal criteria that made fictional plots distinct from other forms of religious writing. Shorter narratives were increasingly finding their way into sermons, religious journals, and newspapers, despite a still-pervasive Calvinist suspicion of fictitious narratives.<sup>52</sup> In

<sup>50</sup> J.W.H., "Short Sermons, No. 12," *Christian Intelligencer and Eastern Chronicle* 1.47 (1827): 186.

<sup>51</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). On the role of mimesis in facilitating comparison Aristotle claims, "Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'" *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961) 55-56.

<sup>52</sup> Hatch notes the shift during the antebellum period from "doctrinal to narrative preaching" as a response to preachers who did nothing but "dogmatize, and define, and dispute." For instance, in 1826 Harvard graduate and Presbyterian missionary Timothy Flint claimed that the "the ten thousand" wanted "low

sermons, anecdotes became common while parables were modernized with anecdotal details.<sup>53</sup> These anecdotes and modern-day parables employed a clear plot structure that differentiated them from other types of sermonic discourse such as exhortation, exegesis, and practical application. Anecdotes served a wide range of needs and were used by populist preachers as well as by more established clergy eager to capitalize on the energy of the Second Great Awakening. In a sermon entitled “The Worth of the Soul,” for instance, Edward Dorr Griffin—New England theologian, President of Williams College, founder of the American Bible Society, and renowned revivalist—invents a scene for his auditors in which two souls are primed for untimely deaths. He describes the progress of the second figure:

I return to the street. I follow another of the crowd through his round of dissipation—through many serious thoughts, many broken resolutions—until I trace him to a dying bed. His soul is forced from the body amidst the agonies of distracted friends, and, staring with wild affright, is dragged to the mouth of the pit and plunged into hell.<sup>54</sup>

Griffin’s story works as a reflexive verbal performance in the tradition of Jonathan

Edwards by integrating an awareness of the cumulative effect of language into its

homiletic function.<sup>55</sup> Yet the image Griffin creates is noteworthy for its narrative

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words, images and illustrations” 138. This was a far cry from the formal sermon handed down in mainstream Congregationalism and Presbyterianism from the Puritans. Perry Miller describes the form of the Puritan sermon as follows: “The Puritan sermon quotes the text and ‘opens’ it as briefly as possible, expounding circumstances and context, explaining its grammatical meanings, reducing its tropes and schemata to prose, and setting forth its logical implications; the sermon then proclaims in a flat, indicative sentence the ‘doctrine’ contained in the text or logically deduced from it, and proceeds to the first reason or proof. Reason follows reason, with no other transition than a period and a number; after the last proof is stated there follow the uses or applications, also in numbered sequence, and the sermon ends when there is nothing more to be said.” *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939) 332-333.

David S. Reynolds has drawn attention to the ways in which antebellum sermons borrowed from other popular print genres, including newspapers, journals, and tract tales. “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America,” *American Quarterly* 32.5 (1980): 478-89.

<sup>53</sup> Father Mapple’s anecdotal retelling of the Jonah story in *Moby-Dick* is also an example of this practice.

<sup>54</sup> Edward Dorr Griffin, “The Worth of the Soul,” *American National Preacher* Vol. XII (Jan. 1838): 7.

<sup>55</sup> Griffin also attended Yale as Edwards had. For more on the use of striking imagery in Edwards’s sermons, see the first chapter of *The Word and Its Witness*.

progression. The life of the sinner he describes has a clear trajectory from beginning to end that occurs in the brief space of two sentences. In his account of his subject's dissolution, details begin to accumulate to set the scene of the man's death. This moment in the plot generates the most striking details of all: the man's soul stares "with wild affright" at the "mouth" of hell, which becomes a concrete detail analogous to the bed or his sympathetic friends. In this thickening of description we see the tale's method—it accumulates force by following a series of incidents (here dissipation followed by death) that suggest details through which a world is created. Griffin's auditors would have seen his sinner in these literary particulars, making the created world of the tale the source of its pedagogy. It was in these details too that the tale distinguished itself from other modes of religious discourse by framing spiritual principles as the organic outgrowth of literary plot.

Tales often advanced plot through dialogue rather than narration, and here their inventiveness was also apparent. Leading tract tale publishers such as the ATS and the ASSU understood that their products needed to entertain as well as instruct, and their editors grouped dialogue with narration under the heading of useful techniques.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, many tales were composed of little more than dialogue, making turns in speech the chief location of plot and its world-generating details. A short tale titled "The Chimney-Sweep and the Watch" in the 1851 *Christian Diadem and Family Keepsake*, a nondenominational annual, exemplifies how dialogue advanced plot and demonstrated

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<sup>56</sup> "Where *narrative* can be made the medium of conveying truth, it is eagerly to be embraced, as it not only engages the attention but also assists the memory, and makes a deeper impression on the heart. Dialogue is another way of rendering a Tract entertaining. The conversation draws the reader insensibly along." *Proceedings of the First Ten Years of the American Tract Society*, 19-20.

spiritual principle.<sup>57</sup> The tale begins with a dramatic situation: “A poor chimney-sweep being called on his work to a nobleman’s house, and left alone in a chamber, saw on the table a beautiful watch.” Grippd by a temptation to steal, he weighs the crime’s moral consequences:

Cautiously taking it in his hand, he said to himself “Ah, if it was only mine! But,” he continued, speaking to himself, “if I take it, I shall be a thief; for the Bible tells me not to steal. And yet,” he added, “no one sees me. Yes, God, who is every where, sees me; and if I took it, how could I pray to him, and how could I die in peace?”<sup>58</sup>

Several turns unfold in the boy’s speech: a desire for the watch, a self-chastisement drawn from biblical precept, an interrogation of this logic, and a concluding reflection on God’s omnipotence. The central biblically derived prohibition against stealing evolves in the circuitous ramblings of the boy’s speech, which both responds to the circumstances of the plot (his situation alone in the house) and advances them (his decision not to steal). Speech reveals the immediacy of narrative invention as the boy plans to steal and then draws back in a way that confirms what Wolfgang Iser has claimed about dialogue in the modernist novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett: it produces a “‘real-life’ situation such as no narrative could ever produce, because it is barred from reality by its fictitious completeness.”<sup>59</sup> Yet “The Chimney Sweep and the Watch” uses the immediacy of invention to advance a biblically derived lesson, and this marks its difference from the ambitions of modernist fiction to create a world meaningful in its social and historical dimensions. In many ways, the world that evangelical tales depicted was less certain—punctuated by divinity but also grounded in material history. Hence, tales are best

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<sup>57</sup> I borrow the print format designation from Brown’s discussion of the *Diadem*. Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 49.

<sup>58</sup> “The Chimney-Sweep and the Watch,” *The Christian Diadem and Family Keepsake*, vol. I (1851): 27.

<sup>59</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 236.

conceived as experiments in relating individual and cosmos, God and history through particular plot scenarios.

In both “The Chimney-Sweep and the Watch” and Griffin’s tale, narrative activity occurs as a result of the chronological progression of the plot. Within the movement from beginning to end these works develop a world as narrative action occurs. The religious function of the plot in these tales is to use this evolution in language to make extrinsic moral principles appear as integral aspects of the life-like world in the work. In this way, the plots of both “The Chimney-Sweep and the Watch” and Griffin’s narrative are reflexive, integrating a sense of narrative development into their revelation of spiritual principles.

Tales were published in a variety of formats, but none as significant as the tract. David Paul Nord has explained how tract production revolutionized antebellum publishing by introducing technology that would serve everything from newspapers to journals to mass-produced novels.<sup>60</sup> Published on an unprecedented scale (both the ATS and the ASSU regularly claimed production in the millions), tracts were distributed as sheets, bound with thread, affixed with paper covers, collected together in large volumes, or issued separately in editions that resembled popular novels and romances. This visual similarity was intentional. As Kyle Roberts has pointed out, readers expected tracts to approximate other books they might own, and in an era that witnessed the declining cost of print supplies this was increasingly possible.<sup>61</sup> Works such as Helen Cross Knight’s

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<sup>60</sup> See *Faith in Reading* and “Evangelical Origins.”

<sup>61</sup> Kyle Roberts, “Locating Popular Religion in the Evangelical Tract: The Roots and Routes of *The Dairyman’s Daughter*,” *Early American Studies* 4.1 (Spring 2006): 250-1. As Roberts points out, the more substantial tract tales were intended for a middle class audience that would have owned novels and romances. Though he also notes that it is difficult to make concrete assertions about the demographics of tracts’ readerships since “just as tracts designed for the poor fell into the hands of middle-class women in



*Robert Dawson* (1846) and Sarah Maria Fry's *Rest for the Weary, or the Story of Hannah Lee* (1856) materially resembled other fictions, yet they also generated analogies at the level of content that were evident in contemporary reviews, as well as in the holdings of libraries and reading societies, which included the tracts under headings such as "romances, novels, and tales," "novels and tales," and "works of fiction, wit, and humor."<sup>62</sup> I do not wish to argue that tract tales were novels or romances; instead, I suggest that the tales occupied a shifting position in contemporary conversation about fiction's possibilities and potential drawbacks—conversation that included novels and romances.<sup>63</sup>

Length was the most important characteristic longer tract tales shared with novels and romances; it was also the source of their pedagogy, since the completeness of the world each tale imagined functioned as the argument for the relevance of the spiritual principles it represented. Both longer and shorter tales used details that pointed to recognizable settings: in Griffin's tale the sinner finds himself in a bed surrounded by friends, and the chimney sweep's struggle is located in a post-Industrial Revolution moment. Yet these short tales were less invested in demonstrating the completeness of their projected worlds than in calling attention to the immediacy of a supernatural order

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sewing groups, advances in print technology reduced the price and made fancier books more widely available throughout the nineteenth century." Roberts, 250.

<sup>62</sup> In making these claims I am drawing on library and reading society lists from Philadelphia between the years of 1807 and 1856: The Carpenters' Company of Philadelphia catalogue of 1857; the 1830 catalogue belonging to the Apprentices' Library Company of Philadelphia; the 1823 catalogue of the Mercantile Library of Philadelphia; the 1824 catalogue of the Philadelphia Circulating Library; the 1824 catalogue of the Union Circulating Library; the 1820 catalogue of the Athenæum of Philadelphia; the Byberry Library Company catalogue of 1821; the 1853 library catalogue of the Institute for Colored Youth; catalogues of the Library Company's holdings from 1807, 1813, and 1856; catalogues of the Mercantile Library of Philadelphia's holdings from 1850 and 1856; and the records of the Young Men's Christian Association from 1855.

<sup>63</sup> For more on the shifting and often contradictory definitions antebellum contemporaries used to describe novels and romances see Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*.

of right and wrong, heaven and hell.<sup>64</sup> Griffin's tale figures this order literally as a pit, while in "The Chimney Sweep and the Watch," it is a verbal account of reality in which God watches the sweep. A work such as *Robert Dawson*, nearly two hundred pages in length, made claims to represent a more complete world than these works, aligning it with contemporary novels and romances. Yet though some readers would remember it fondly for its life-like setting in rural New England, it retained the programmatic ambitions of the shorter tales to reveal the truth of spiritual principles using fictional plot.<sup>65</sup>

*Robert Dawson* works through a deferral of its lessons, creating an effect in which biblical precepts emerge directly from narrative circumstances. Each chapter creates a specific sense of time and place in order to demonstrate the pertinence of spiritual truisms in a world that evokes the completeness and sufficiency of history. For example, the first chapter opens with a scenario and a setting:

The most interesting event of our family history, during my tenth year, was the purchase of a cow. My father had a patch of land two miles off, large enough to pasture a cow, and he well thought her milk might greatly add to the comforts of our frugal table.<sup>66</sup>

Metaphysical speculation is nowhere to be found; instead, concrete details anchor the reader in a specific time and place—Robert's tenth year in the rural countryside with a family living by well-known standards of New England frugality. The purchase of the cow creates a scenario in which Robert must be responsible for taking it to pasture, a task

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<sup>64</sup> In attending to levels of completeness in the tales and their respective distributions of emphasis on the historical or supernatural I draw from Eric Hayot's work on worldedness, which he defines as "the unconscious of the work", or "the establishing frame for the unmentioned rules that constitute the work as a total whole (that is, a work at all)." Eric Hayot, "On Literary Worlds," *MLQ* 72.2 (June 2011):142

<sup>65</sup> Edward Eggleston, known for local-color works such as *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871), describes *Robert Dawson* as the first story he read with a New England background. "Books That Have Helped Me," *Forum* 3.6 (1887): 579.

<sup>66</sup> Helen Cross Knight, *Robert Dawson, or, The Brave Spirit* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1846), 9. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically.

against which he struggles once he discovers that his friend Charlie is exempt from driving his cow in the rain. The chapter hinges on a moment posited with realist exactitude: “A cold rain came pattering upon the windows one morning in October” (12). Robert refuses to rise. His father chastises him, offering the following precept as encouragement: “My son, you must meet the shower just as you meet all obstacles. It will be *only a few drops at a time*” (17). Even here his father’s advice hardly seems metaphysical. Instead, its true significance is revealed only at the end of the chapter, when a mature Robert reflects on the meaning of his father’s words, obscure to him in his boyhood: “I have since learned from the volume of Divine truth, that this is also a great principle of religion:—That we know not what shall be on the morrow, but sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (19).<sup>67</sup> The chapter’s realism creates a situation in which this adaptation of Matthew appears to emanate from the events of the plot. Put another way, the world constructed in the plot creates the circumstances for the refigured biblical verse, making plot and precept mutually dependent.

The unfolding structure of plot allows *Robert Dawson* to reveal lessons by moving the reader inductively from incident to biblical verse, making revelation dependent on chronological narrative progression. As Robert grows, he is spurred on by his father’s early advice to address new difficulties, using this philosophy to engage work that will earn money for a new suit—taking a neighbor’s meal to grind and stacking wood (“it is only stick by stick, and a new suit to pay for it!”[92]). Once he has earned the money his father congratulates him with another piece of advice:

I am glad to see you *accomplishing* something, my son; *working out* wise and useful purposes; and then executing them *with your own hands*. And

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<sup>67</sup> “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” Matthew 6:34

when you begin, resolve never to give up, if it is good and right to succeed. Put your hand to the plough and look not back. If you make up your mind to do anything, *do it*. (106-107)<sup>68</sup>

The passage refers to Robert's recent work, refiguring Jesus' admonition from Luke to apply to the fictional premises of the plot. Although it is possible to see how this reconfiguration of the gospel would appear distorting (and it certainly did to critics such as Andrews), the invention that results from combining the words of the Bible with the specifics of fiction sustains *Robert Dawson's* pedagogy. Indeed, using fiction in this way actually makes a case for the Bible's universality, since it evidences how the holy writ applies even (and especially) to a specific case—and by extension to the reader's own, which unfolds in a similarly complete historical world. Robert's reflections on his father's advice in this chapter also make clear how the tale self-consciously builds its lessons around the progress of fictional plot: "In short, emphatic sayings like these did my father impart great truths upon us by the earnestness and force with which he uttered them. Their value and wisdom we gradually experienced *as we obeyed them*" (107; emphasis mine). The "great truths" of the Bible that Robert's father has adapted to pertain to the events of his son's life depend on narrative development for their full significance, making the process of reading *Robert Dawson* one of discovery and realization that matches Robert's own. The tale thus employs the structure of historical time mirrored in the form of the plot in order to argue transcendent truths, a combination of sensibilities that bespeaks a set of aesthetic ambitions that have been lost in discussion of the tracts' literary merits.

The practice of revealing biblical truths through narrative development is repeated on a larger level at the conclusion of the tale, as Robert's father's early advice shapes his

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<sup>68</sup> "And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Luke 9:62.

adoption of explicitly devotional practices. Apprenticed to a printer in another town, Robert initially departs from the pious ways he had been accustomed to at home.<sup>69</sup> Going out for a sleigh-ride on a Sunday with his fellow apprentices, he is ashamed and confused when they stop at a pub and drink. Upon their return Robert resolves to pursue a Christian life; the next day he seeks out the minister, Mr. Anson, for guidance:

The business of the day was over, and I went in the direction of Mr. Anson's house. Many times was I well-nigh persuaded to go back. Coming to a place where the street parted into two, I took two steps in the way opposite from Mr. Anson's. "This will not do," I said, within myself. "*What you have got to do, do it: and with a resolute heart.*" (163-164)<sup>70</sup>

His father's advice—an adaptation of Ecclesiastes 9:10—has been so thoroughly absorbed that it suggests itself here and (miraculously) applies to Robert's current situation. Earlier struggles are placed in perspective: "Ah yes! I knew something about striving for the physical life, and these same business-habits I found just *as necessary* in the spiritual life" (170). The entire narrative, which had appeared to be about a young New England boy's attempts to learn useful habits—industry, responsibility—is recast at the conclusion of this chapter to reveal a higher purpose. Yet only here does the narration make its pedagogical ambitions explicit: "What had not a little resolution, under the favor of God, wrought out for me! My father's training and example were now developed in their true results. I had found a friend, and one that could instruct and guide me" (170). This moment of reflection preserves the progression of plot as an autonomous structure that has built a world in which Robert has matured from childhood to early manhood, but it also transmutes the events of the plot into steps on the path to salvation. In this way,

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<sup>69</sup> *Robert Dawson* owed much of its popularity to its subject matter: stories about the development of young men who left home seeking employment were popular during this period because of the shifting nature and location of antebellum employment. For more on the moral self-cultivation of young men in the nineteenth century, see Thomas Augst, *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>70</sup> "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might; for *there is* no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest." Ecclesiastes 9:10.

*Robert Dawson's* unfolding plot and historical detail have become proof of a higher order of meaning that contains them, as it contains history itself and the life of the reader. Only by fully adopting the developing form of narrative, which at a structural level reflected an idea of history that seemed to disprove divine providence, could *Robert Dawson* make a modern argument for spiritual truth.

*Robert Dawson's* ethos of self-sufficiency connected it to several contemporary political conversations. Cathy Davidson has correlated the early national novel and emerging discourses of self-cultivation fostered by the Revolution. Newly independent readers and writers negotiated the unfamiliar terrain of political freedom by using literary forms that explored their historical situation through mimesis, preferring these forms over older modes of exhortatory.<sup>71</sup> Davidson treats the novel as an incipiently secular genre, yet this does little to explain contemporary religious fictions such as tract tales. Indeed, scholars of the Second Great Awakening have demonstrated that increased feelings of self-determination did not mitigate religious sentiment; instead, ideas about self-determination flourished as popular preachers and religious leaders sought to purify American churches from their perceived flaws. Gregory Jackson has described how the homiletic novel flourished in this period among evangelical readers attuned to spiritual self-sufficiency as a mode of cultivating piety and living towards Christ.<sup>72</sup> The modern character of Reformed Protestantism—its reliance on rational, reflexive thought and its incorporation of historical thinking—gave rise to modern expressions such as the

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<sup>71</sup> “Psychologically, the early novel embraced a new relationship between art and audience, writer and reader, a relationship that replaced the authority of the sermon or Bible with the enthusiasms of sentiment, horror, or adventure, all of which relocate authority in the individual response of the reading self. Speaking directly to that self, the early American novel ideologically represented and encouraged the aspirations of its readers—aspirations in conflict, at many points, with ideas preached from the pulpit or taught in the common schools.” Davidson 14.

<sup>72</sup> See *The Word and Its Witness*, chapter two.

religious novel. Yet Reformed Protestantism also brought older models of cosmology forward in time. The “transhistorical agency” Jackson has attributed to readers of homiletic novels derived from Protestantism’s dual commitment to modern and pre-modern cosmic visions. For these reasons, popular religious works such as the tract tales did not express a particular national or social ideology with any consistency because they did not take history as an ultimate horizon of meaning. Instead tract tales were read across nation, class, race, and gender for a model of transhistorical and self-sufficient personal piety.

Tract tales’ politics extended from their perceived spiritual relevance in particular contexts of use. Thanks to the strength of the African American evangelical community in antebellum Philadelphia and the importance of the city as a center of political activity, I used it as a test case for seeing how tract tales signified in a context that was politically and religiously charged. What I found was surprising. While African American evangelicals appear to have been avid readers of tract tales, they were not producing their own works in this genre until the inception of the *Christian Recorder* in 1854, and even then the editors of that paper often reprinted tales from other sources like *The Christian Intelligencer* and the *Boston Recorder*. These findings reveal a new significance for the work of Julia C. Collins and Frances E.W. Harper since they were the first writers in the African American evangelical community associated with the *Recorder* to use the genre of the tract tale to discuss the political problems of racial prejudice and slavery. By contrast, the evangelical tales that predate Collins’s and Harper’s works manifest a politics that has more to do with personal religious practice and less to do with forms of political agitation recognizable to critics today. The readers of the *Recorder* engaged with

political exhortatory while also cultivating the personal piety modeled in the tales because they considered these complementary rather than antithetical modes of addressing historical problems. In what follows, I will consider how the practice of piety modeled in the tales was part of a larger political orientation in the antebellum African American evangelical community in Philadelphia.

In tracing tract circulation among African American readers in Philadelphia outside of the *Recorder* I found a wide array of materials, but none that dealt directly with the position of African American subjects from a point of view within the community. I consulted the extant library listings and records of the African Methodist Episcopal Church's Book Concern, the main distributive arm of the A.M.E. Church, in which I found a heterogeneous group of materials intended for all levels of readers.<sup>73</sup> Guides to sermonizing, Locke's essays, Blair's *Lectures*, various histories of the Reformation and the Scottish Enlightenment, Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and numerous British and American didactic tract tales—including works by the ubiquitous Hannah More and Legh Richmond—formed the content of this archive.<sup>74</sup> The A.M.E. depository favored narratives published by the Methodist Episcopal Church Sunday School Union, but it also carried works published by the Philadelphia-based ASSU. In 1861, the A.M.E. Book Concern was selling a tale titled *Rest for the Weary, or The Story of Hannah Lee* (1823) a tract republished from the

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<sup>73</sup> This was common in Sabbath school libraries in most American communities during this period, which were used to serve the needs of the growing population of the literate. Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

Methodologically, I followed Elizabeth McHenry in looking for the library holdings of the various reading societies established by African Americans in Philadelphia in this period. Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). What I discovered, however, is that while the names of these groups have survived, evidence of *what* they read has in large part disappeared.

<sup>74</sup> Richmond's *The Dairyman's Daughter* and More's *The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain* were without question the most popular didactic tales of the period in America, despite both being British.



British edition by the ASSU that also appears in the 1856 catalogue of the Library Company of Philadelphia under the category heading “Fiction.” Taken as a whole, this body of material reflects the tract tales’ generic ambiguity and indicates continuity in reading materials across class and racial lines during this period.

In the library catalogue for the premier educational institution in the community at this time, the Institute for Colored Youth, I also found a range of materials, but none dealing directly with African American subjects. The catalogue of 1853 lists *Robert Dawson* along with a host of narratives published by the ASSU and the ATS as part of its selection of didactic narratives. Along with these narratives, the library contained numerous histories of the Reformation, pedagogical works such as Blair’s *Lectures* and Locke’s essays, as well as tracts about missionary work in Africa.<sup>75</sup> While the Institute for Colored Youth, the A.M.E. Book Concern, and the library of the Mother Bethel Church—the founding institution of the A.M.E. Church—possessed a number of narratives about white American and British subjects and biblical characters, I did not find any of the numerous narratives published about “exemplary” African American subjects by the ATS or the ASSU listed in these records.<sup>76</sup> Even the Institute, which had been opened by Friends, did not possess any of the more politically liberal narratives about black subjects published by the Tract Association of Friends. This research suggests that although African American religious readers were not interested in

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<sup>75</sup> Founded by the Society of Friends, the Institute was staffed by six teachers, all African American, half of whom were alumni of the school. Octavius V. Cato, *Our Alma Mater. An Address Delivered at Concert Hall, on the occasion of the Twelfth Annual commencement of the Institute for Colored Youth, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1864* (Philadelphia: C. Sherman Son & Co., Printers, 1864) 3.

<sup>76</sup> For the ATS these included *The Praying Negro* (1819) and *The African Servant* (No. 53); *The Happy Negro* (No. 7); *The Forgiving African* (No. 92); *The Blind Slave in the Mines* (No. 126); *The Narrative of Phebe Ann Jacobs* (No. 536); *Old Moses* (No. 571), all reprinted in *General Tracts* (New York: ATS, 1849). For more on this group of works see David Morgan, *Protestants & Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

narratives that racialized spirituality from a white perspective, they did engage with narratives about white and biblical subjects that modeled a form of religious self-sufficiency that was not racially specific. The point here is not that black readers thought Hannah Lee's circumstances as a poor English girl sent out to service pertained to the historical realities of American slavery or racialized wage labor in Northern cities. Instead, the paradigm of overcoming obstacles and progressing in faith that works such as *Hannah Lee* represented—the model of the spiritual pilgrimage—was valuable to African American readers because its lessons could apply across historical time and place as a template for action in the world.

One of the most valuable resources for tracing the tract tale in the African American evangelical community in Philadelphia is the *Christian Recorder*. Established as a continuation of a previous publication, the *Christian Herald*, the *Recorder* experienced a short-lived start in 1854. In 1861 it came under the editorship of Elisha Weaver who transformed it into a foundational resource for the community as slavery ended and war began.<sup>77</sup> The recently reclaimed didactic work of Julia C. Collins first emerged in the *Recorder*, as did that of her better-known contemporary Frances E. W. Harper.<sup>78</sup> Yet Collins and Harper's didactic work on slavery is not representative of the tales published in the early years of the *Recorder*. These tales do not address history as much as they adhere to the typical plot structure of the pilgrimage, tracing progress to salvation. A paradigmatic example of such work occurs in the inaugural edition of the *Recorder* in January of 1861. Entitled "Broken Vow" it reads:

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<sup>77</sup> The 2006 winter edition of *African American Review* has a number of excellent essays about the *Recorder*'s significance to the Philadelphia community by Mitch Kachun, Edlie Wong, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jean Lee Cole, and Veta Smith Tucker.

<sup>78</sup> For more on the significance of Collins's and Harper's work in the evangelical context see chapter four.

"O God! in pity spare my boy; take not my first, my only son; I cannot give him up." These words were uttered by a youthful mother, as she knelt by the side of her darling child, who seemed to be on the verge of death. He was her only love on earth, for the father had gone to an early grave. Beauty of person and an amiable and loving nature combined to rivet him closely to his mother's heart. She lived alone for him, and centered all her hopes upon him. To see him wise and great, to hear him praised and see him honored, was her highest wish. But now disease was wasting that frail frame, and in the prospects of the tomb, she remembered her great lack - she had not taught him piety of heart to God; and again she prayed: "If I have made thy gift an idol in my heart, forgive, O God! but spare my child, and I will consecrate him to thy service." Her hands were clasped and her eyes raised to heaven; and as thus she knelt, a soft voice said, "Mother." She started, and with bursting heart bent over the sick one. The flush had left his cheek - the hue of death was on his brow. "Mother," he faintly said, "shall I die? Is this death? I am cold; oh! take me in your arms." Despair seized her heart; she clasped him to her breast, and in agony she again said; "Will not God hear me? Father, spare, oh! spare his life. He shall be thine!"<sup>79</sup>

The tale's primary focus is spiritual progress rather than a particular historical location or identity. As in "The Chimney-Sweep and the Watch" and *Robert Dawson*, narrative action depends on a turn in plot, as the mother realizes her previous wrongs and resolves to attend to her son's spiritual life. Within this frame, dialogue establishes the action and devotional precepts appear to arise spontaneously from the circumstances of the son's illness. The scene contains no reference to identity or historical location, but it is also difficult to read the story as a denial of historical identity. Instead, the most significant aspect of the tale is its frame of action. Although this frame could be read as transcending historical circumstance, the physical location of the tale in the pages of the *Recorder* next to other forms of more recognizable political discourse makes it more likely that "Broken Vow" was understood to have its own political significance. Reading a tale such as "Broken Vow" within the *Recorder* suggests that its political work was recognized by the editors as differing from other forms of political discourse while also having a place

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<sup>79</sup> "Broken Vow," *Christian Recorder* 26 Jan 1861.

among them. This political work centered on the cultivation of religious behaviors to be implemented in daily living. Since living a religious life for the *Recorder's* readers entailed protestation against injustice it was always connected to political action.

Given this fact, one category that explains the political function of the tales is use. The value of the tale derived from its representation of patterns that could be applied to the reader's life, making the ultimate horizon of the tale's meaning its return to the world.<sup>80</sup> Use explains the diversity of materials reprinted, advertised, and carried by the *Recorder* and the A.M.E. Book Concern. Both organizations advertised works published by the ATS and the ASSU despite the well-known failures of these organizations to speak out against slavery. The debate over the ASSU began in 1848 when the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society published *Letters Respecting a Book "Dropped From the Catalogue" of the American Sunday School Union, in Compliance with the Dictation of Slave Power*. The work in question was *Jacob and His Sons* (1832), which the editors of the ASSU had pulled from sale lists after Southern members complained about its strong anti-slavery overtones.<sup>81</sup> The ATS also faced scrutiny as individual congregations began boycotting their goods, leading to the separation of a Boston branch willing to write against slavery from the parent organization in 1858.<sup>82</sup> The editors of the *Christian*

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<sup>80</sup> Ricœur 53.

<sup>81</sup> The objectionable line follows the sale of Joseph into slavery by his brothers: "Regardless of Joseph's cries and tears, they had sold him as a slave; and for many years afterwards their consciences stung them for this enormity." I take this line from the reissued edition, but it is doubtful, given the result of the war, that the editors would have altered it. *The Life of Jacob, and his Son Joseph* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, c. 1869). 92-93.

<sup>82</sup> According to the editors of the ATS, the first article of their constitution prevented their printing anything that was not "calculated to receive the approbation of all evangelical Christians." *Testimony of Five of the Society's Founders. Historical Facts Limiting Its Issues to Publications in Which Evangelical Christians Agree* (New York: American Tract Society, 1857). 8. And yet, one of the protests against their selective editorial policy notes that their notorious generic laxity over what constituted a "tract" in the first place made their claims to representational rigidity suspect: "That the directors of the society have not been very rigid in the construction of [the first] article where favorite ideas were to be carried out, is evident from the fact that the words 'Religious Tracts,' which have always had a definite meaning as referring to small

*Recorder* were aware of these conflicts, yet the *Recorder* continued to advertise works published by the ASSU and the ATS, while the Book Concern stocked titles from the ASSU. Rather than reading this as capitulatory or mercenary I see it as confirming the fact that the editors of the *Recorder* and the administrators of the Book Concern valued these works as useful tools that did not depend on the political orientations of their authors or publishers. I would argue that they saw tract tales as guides, like Bunyan's and Kempis's works, which advanced truth that was realized in use by the reader.

In order to understand the use value of "Broken Vow" or *Robert Dawson*—neither of which speak directly to the historical situation of African American readers—it is helpful to compare them with works about "exemplary" black subjects published by the ATS and the ASSU that failed to make inroads with black readers. *The Narrative of Phebe Ann Jacobs*, written by Mrs. T.C. Upham and published by the ATS in 1850, provides an example of the problems that arose from conflating historical and spiritual identity. Phebe was born a slave in Morris County New Jersey in 1785. Following her mistress to Brunswick, Maine after her marriage, Phebe lived with the family until her mistress's death. At this point she chose to live alone as a free woman while continuing to play an active role in the evangelical community in Brunswick. After her death in 1850 her Bible comes into the evangelical community's possession: "Phebe's marks [in her Bible] beneath or beside a passage, made often with a heavy stroke of her pencil, come to our minds with the force of a commentary, for she herself was a 'living epistle,' 'known

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unbound pamphlets, have been stretched to include large bound volumes on the one hand, and monthly newspapers on the other. Why those who have no scruple in thus expanding the fundamental idea of the society beyond the proscribed limits, should suddenly become so conscientious in adhering to the letter of the constitution in other respects, is not so clear as could be desired." *The unanimous remonstrance of the Fourth Congregational Church, Hartford, Conn., against the policy of the American Tract Society on the subject of slavery* (Hartford: Foundry of Silas Andrus & Son, 1855) 20.

and read' by us all."<sup>83</sup>The reference is to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, in which the believer is compared to Christ, the original "living epistle," whose inspiration by the Spirit made the entire Bible the living Word of God.<sup>84</sup>Yet the description of Phebe does something that Paul's words do not, making her legibility as a spiritual figure dependent on her historical situation. For Paul, the believer is a living letter because of the Spirit, while Phebe is a living letter for her community because of her social singularity. Her spiritual singularity extends from her social condition; hence the narrator's distinction between Phebe and "us all." There is no room for Phebe to recast history from her own spiritual perspective, and so history becomes a tool for rendering her legible.<sup>85</sup> The historical and social constraints *The Narrative of Phebe Ann Jacobs* places on its primary subject offer an informative contrast to those in *Robert Dawson*. While this work is clearly narrated from the subject position of a white male, I would argue that its suggestiveness as a model for lived religious practice was more persuasive to African American audiences because of the freedom it accorded its main character in choosing his spiritual destiny.

If tales that modeled a form of spiritual self-sufficiency were part of the context of antebellum African American writing, then this form of writing differed from the self-manifesting works discussed most notably by William L. Andrews in black writing during this period. Andrews has written persuasively about the "invitation to appropriation" that biblical tropes offered African American writers who gradually turned

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<sup>83</sup> Mrs. T.C. Upham, *Narrative of Phebe Ann Jacobs* (ATS: New York, c. 1850) 3.

<sup>84</sup> "Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." 2 Corinthians 3:2-3.

<sup>85</sup> For a discussion of how African Americans used the Exodus trope during this period to re-imagine history see Mark A. Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776-1865," *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982): 39-58.

a religious position on history into a way of rewriting it from the perspective of the authoring self.<sup>86</sup> On one hand, the evidence I have discussed seems to confirm this thesis: The popularity of pilgrimage narratives such as *Robert Dawson* among African American readers suggests that self-sufficiency was a popular theme, while the rejection of *The Narrative of Phebe Ann Jacobs* indicates that works that rendered black subjects as passive failed to generate interest. Yet writing from a religious perspective in this period was not about advancing an autonomous vision of history as much as it was about revealing history's ultimate significance and the eternal patterns that inhered in it. This is different from the creative work Andrews describes because it makes written innovation less the expression of a unique and autonomous authorial vision and more the revelation of a divine design. Writing from a spiritual perspective complemented contemporary political discourse because it imagined history's ultimate significance, and it is for this reason that moral tales were integrated into African American political discourse of the period, evidenced by the pages of the *Recorder*. And while early moral tales by African Americans did not explicitly revise history, later tales by Collins and Harper would extend the genre of the tale by making African American history its subject, generating the moral uplift fiction characteristic of the latter half of the century.

Using plot, I have described the innovative representations in antebellum tract tales that manifested divine patterns in the immanent mechanics of writing. In so doing, I have identified a form of creative writing in which visions of the truth of history from the point of view of an autonomous author were eschewed in favor of making the truths in history apparent. To return to my opening provocation, it seems likely that antebellum

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<sup>86</sup> William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 96.

evangelical readers valued tales at a moment when history was coming to be recognized as an increasingly autonomous discourse because they recast history as part of a larger, cosmic temporal frame. Yet these recasting exercises maintained a delicate and perhaps unsustainable balance between material history and eternity, text and moral meaning. If textual mechanics were what brought universal truths into being in the work, there was always the threat that the textual effect was all there was. And yet, because they combined seemingly antithetical elements—devotional precepts and literary innovations—the plots of the evangelical tales can be read as signs of the unevenness of secularization theorized by Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and others.<sup>87</sup> Rather than demonstrating a fundamental dissonance between a religious worldview and the expressive capacity of the rational, modern subject, tract tales indicate that modern narrative strategies have historically been employed for religious ends and that attending to these strategies enhances the critical signification of the terms modernity, religion, and literariness.

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<sup>87</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).



### Chapter Three: Form, Epiphany, and Christian Best Sellers

Letters, here, languished unconscious, and *Uncle Tom*, instead of making even one of the cheap short cuts through the medium in which books breathe, even as fishes in water, went gaily roundabout it altogether, as if a fish, a wonderful “leaping” fish, had simply flown through the air. This feat accomplished, the surprising creature could naturally fly anywhere, and one of the first things it did was thus to flutter down on every stage, literally without exception, in America and Europe. If the amount of life represented in such a work is measurable by the ease with which representation is taken up and carried further, carried even violently furthest, the fate of Mrs. Stowe’s picture was conclusive: it simply sat down wherever it lighted and made itself, so to speak, at home.

~Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*

At first glance, Henry James’s assessment of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel seems counter-intuitive. Why would the “amount of life represented” in the text make it easy to duplicate? If this “life” is the novel’s realism, and realism is the textual representation of history, then we have a certain logical impasse: History specifies, anchoring characters and plots in particular times and places, making them less not more interchangeable. Yet readers of Stowe’s novel often recall not its detail or its strategies of representation but its characters—and often not the most developed of these. Something about Uncle Tom, Simon Legree, Ophelia, and little Eva makes them memorable and, according to James, easily moveable. Is it realism?

As we usually think of it, realist representation favors the historical particular over the transcendent type. In “The Art of Fiction” (1884) James details how the realist author arrives at narrative particulars, extrapolating from their own lived experience:

I remember an English novelist, a woman of genius, telling me she was much commended for the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales of the nature and way of life of the French Protestant youth. She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite being; she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a Pasteur, some of the young Protestants were seated at table round a finished meal. The glimpse made

a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. She had got her direct personal impression, and she turned out her type. She knew what youth was, and what Protestantism; she also had the advantage of having seen what it was to be French, so that she converted these ideas into a concrete image and produced a reality. Above all, however, she was blessed with the faculty which when you give it an inch takes an ell, and which for the artist is a much greater source of strength than any accident of residence or place in the social scale. The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education.<sup>1</sup>

Realist narration derives here from a uniquely modern faculty that takes the ell from the inch, guessing the unseen from the seen. As Ian Watt has described it, recognition of this faculty began in the seventeenth century with the turn away from a Platonic worldview invested in timeless truths to a preoccupation with the truth of human consciousness. For contemporary philosophers, identity was the product of the continuity of the consciousness in time.<sup>2</sup> This made embeddedness in time or history a central feature of modern identity. No longer did the mind seek after timeless Platonic paradigms: instead, truth was increasingly understood to be a process that depended on the internal, ratiocinative activity of the mind. This did not mean that externalities were not important: John Locke, for instance, clearly maintained that one primary function of reason was to reveal things that had an ontological status external to the mind.<sup>3</sup> But thinking itself was

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888) 389.

<sup>2</sup> This is John Locke's definition of identity, from which Watt draws. See Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), Book II, Chapter XXVII. For Watt's argument about Locke: *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), particularly chapter one.

<sup>3</sup> "In fine then, when our Senses do actually convey into our Understandings any Idea, we cannot but be satisfied, that there doth something at that time really exist without us, which doth affect our Senses, and by them give notice of it self to our apprehensive Faculties, and actually produce that Idea, which we then perceive: and we cannot so far distrust their Testimony, as to doubt, that such Collections of simple Ideas, as we have observed by our Senses to be united together, do really exist together." Locke, *Essay* 635.

now an essential part of coming to such truths, an immanent ingress to meaning that ceased to be imagined as external to the human mind or the human experience of history.<sup>4</sup>

In James's description, the experience of consciousness is crucial to how the modern author develops her subject. From her own development as a thinking subject in a particular time and place the author can guess how this same process might be with other thinking subjects in different contexts. Realism, as Watt and those following him have defined it, is the expression in literature of this effect: the force of a particular historical moment on an emerging human subject.<sup>5</sup> Timeless truths and universal templates are thus less compelling for the realist writer than are characters in particular historical circumstances, which are developed in the unfolding structure of the novel—a structure that formally mirrors the diachronic structure of human thought itself.

James also raises an issue in this passage that does not entirely fit with the narrative I've just rehearsed, which returns us to his characterization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The modern author, as James describes her in the second passage, generates a type from her impressions, beginning not with the particular but with the general. This is a function of the epistemology James describes later in the passage as "the condition of feeling life in *general* so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any

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<sup>4</sup> For philosopher Charles Taylor, Augustine is a crucial link between Plato and the work of thinkers like Rene Descartes and Locke. In Augustine's work, "our principle route to God is not through the object domain but 'in' ourselves. This is because God is not just the transcendent object or just the principle of order of the nearer object, which we strain to see. God is also and for us primarily the basic support and underlying principle of our knowing activity. God is not just what we long to see, but what powers the eye which sees." Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 129.

<sup>5</sup> J. Paul Hunter closely follows Ian Watt in his description of the primary attributes of realist fiction. These include contemporaneity in subject matter; credibility and probability in the same; a concern with everyday existence and common personages; a rejection of traditional plots; "traditional-free" language—language unconcerned with classical forms of style; a concern with subjective individualism; the desire to create an empathetic experience, in which the reader can participate in lives they might never have known; coherence and unity of design, in terms of themes and action; the tendency to digression and parentheticals; and a self-consciousness about innovation and novelty in design. J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 23-25.

*particular* corner of it” (my emphasis). If the function of the novel is to unfold a particular experience in space and time, the passage suggests that you must begin with a frame, the remnant of the general, which you eviscerate in the process of writing. You must begin, in other words, with a type.

The second passage illuminates James’s account of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The irony of his description, though palpable, is not a critique; he treats the “amount of life represented” in Stowe’s novel as real even if in his view it has little to do with “the medium in which books breathe,”—a medium we know he took quite seriously. The “life” of Stowe’s characterizations, measurable through their replication and reiteration, is typical, following patterns of truth to which life can be seen to conform. If we think about James’s oeuvre a bit further we see where this reality was structurally crucial to his thinking as something he worked consciously against: Christopher Newman of *The American* (1877); Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881); Adam Verver of *The Golden Bowl* (1904)—all are types, evacuated of their typicality through the activity of narration.<sup>6</sup> In James’s description of the activity of authorship, we see how a typical epistemology forms the base from which realism departs: the author begins by “turning out her type,” moving from there into “particular corners” of lived experience. The truth

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<sup>6</sup> An interesting moment, further confirming his use of types and typical thinking, occurs in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*. James describes the process of hunting up scenes for the photographic images that were to accompany the novel as follows: “The problem thus was thrilling, for though the small shop [the shop in which Charlotte and the Prince first encounter the bowl] was but a shop of the mind, of the author’s projected world, in which objects are primarily related to each other, and therefore not ‘taken from’ a particular establishment anywhere, only an image distilled and intensified, as it were, from a drop of the essence of such establishments in general, our need (since the picture was, as I have said, also completely to speak for itself) prescribed a concrete, independent, vivid instance, the instance that should oblige us by the marvel of an accidental rightness.” The “rightness” of the shop is not only its correspondence with what the author imagined, but its likeness to “the essence of such establishments in general,” the typical quality that the author himself seeks to draw out in imagining the shop in the first place. Henry James, “Preface to *The Golden Bowl*,” *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 1328.

of Stowe's types and the "life" that they embody therefore belongs to this order of knowledge: a reality that realism needs, but which it also sets out to undo.

Stowe's insights into her own fictional method offer an interesting counterpoint to James, since she too makes claims for the "reality" of her first novel in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853). Written a year after her first best-selling novel, *The Key* was a response to virulent Southern criticisms of the novel, which claimed that it was more fiction than fact and that as such it ought to steer away from making real moral and political claims about slavery.<sup>7</sup> Criticism that simply reads *The Key* as a defensive capitulation to these empiricist critiques runs the risk of overlooking the extent to which Stowe remained committed to her form. She offers a subtle definition of her project in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the outset of *The Key*:

Artistically considered, it might not be best to point out in which quarry and from which region each fragment of the mosaic picture had its origin; and it is equally unartistic to disentangle the glittering web of fiction, and show out of what real warp and woof it is woven, and with what real coloring dyed. But the book had a purpose entirely transcending the artistic one, and accordingly encounters at the hands of the public demands not usually made on fictitious works. It is treated as a reality—sifted, tried, tested, as a reality; and it is therefore as a reality it may be proper that it should be defended.<sup>8</sup>

The novel is treated as a reality because of its spiritual purpose, which encompasses its political aims. It is *this* reality, the reality of the novel as a religious work, which Stowe will go on to defend in *The Key*. Rather than affirming a hierarchy between historical fact and fiction, Stowe suggests another category for thinking about literary form as something neither purely referential nor aesthetic. She insists that art can be art without

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<sup>7</sup> Negative reviews of the novel were numerous, but among the most well-known is George F. Holmes's review in *The Southern Literary Messenger* 18.10 (1852): 630-639. Holmes also reviewed *The Key*, equally unfavorably: *The Southern Literary Messenger* 19.6 (1853): 321-331.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, Arno Press, 1968). 1. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

losing its relevance to a larger, spiritual order of meaning, an order of meaning that for her is the ultimate measure of her novel's truth.

Perhaps this is not as surprising as it might at first appear. Michael McKeon reminds us that the earliest motivating energy in realism was an investment in an Aristotelian "truth of things": art was meant to illuminate larger structuring principles, historical and eschatological.<sup>9</sup> Objectivity was a matter of fidelity to the external orders that mattered through a manifestation of their *geist* rather than an exact replication of their matter. As McKeon puts it,

[Realism] validates literary creation for being not history but history-like, "true" to the only external reality that still makes a difference, but also sufficiently apart from it (hence "probable" and "universal") to be true to itself as well. The idea of realism exists to concede the accountability of art to a prior reality, without seeming to compromise the uniquely modern belief that such reality as it is answerable to already is internalized in art itself as a demystified species of spirituality.<sup>10</sup>

The "universal" aspects of the early realism he describes are obviously Platonic, but they exist on a crucial cusp between seeing truth as something external to the literary text to which *both* history and art must conform and as something that takes meaning from literary form. What McKeon reminds us is that early realism had not yet decided between these two possibilities and instead maintained both. Stowe's claim in the opening of *The Key* that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* makes an embodied reality in language that is also religious

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<sup>9</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).119. According to his argument, literary production during the seventeenth century was dominated by two epistemes: romance and naïve empiricism. The contradictions between these positions generated extreme skepticism, which in turn produced the need to be able to account for the truth of linguistic creation.

My thinking about "external" orders of meaning is greatly indebted to Charles Taylor's discussion of the shift from extrinsic to immanent moral sources in modernity. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); *Sources of the Self*. See particularly part one.

<sup>10</sup> McKeon. 120.

fits quite well into this paradigm of early realism: truth is immanent in the novel, but also expressive of something beyond it.

We should not make the mistake of taking Stowe's claims for fiction as indicative of antebellum Protestant majority thinking on the subject. Numerous critics thought the "demystified" autonomy of fiction was a serious threat to the authority of Scripture, being a lewd and debased use of the medium that also formed the Word. Such critics lent their voices to pamphlets and articles in the religious press even as a growing market for evangelical print made the use of fiction for pedagogical purposes too popular to ignore.<sup>11</sup> This conservative element was challenged by the populist energies of the Second Great Awakening, which embraced popular media forms.<sup>12</sup> Conservative Congregationalists and Presbyterians remained suspicious of the idea of total sanctification, yet the interdenominational holiness movement's drive to make daily living central to religious practice was nearly ubiquitous.<sup>13</sup> In *The Word and Its Witness*, Gregory S. Jackson explains the new importance of what he terms "homiletic realism" in this context, which used the representational strategies of realism to develop contextually specific fictional

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<sup>11</sup> On the general situation of antebellum print see Ronald J Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). For a general survey of printing and publishing trends in the early national period, see Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, eds., *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, A History of the Book in America ; V. 2 (Chapel Hill: Published in association with the American Antiquarian Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Also, Scott E. Caspar et al., eds., *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*, A History of the Book in America ; V. 3 (Chapel Hill: Published in association with the American Antiquarian Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 2007). On the relationship between denominational growth and print practices, see Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill ; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). On the role of evangelical culture in developing mass print production practices in the antebellum period, see David Paul Nord, 'The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835', *Journalism Monographs*, 88 (1984).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the iconoclasm of the Second Great Awakening, see Nathan O Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, c1989).

<sup>13</sup> The second stage in the conversion process, as defined by Wesleyan Methodism. At this stage, the believer is above the sin/regeneration cycle that marks the first stage of conversion; signified by their total absorption in thoughts of God. For more on this: Gregory S Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). 125

templates for the believer, guiding them in theological terrain less determined than ever before.<sup>14</sup> Calvinist predestination, which had previously confined the faithful to a resigned acceptance of their fate, was being replaced by an incipient Arminianism, making the individual newly responsible for cultivating a living faith.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the Christian best-selling novel was poised to emerge as a response to rapidly shifting cultural ground, despite a significant and energetic resistance within the religious press itself.

Readers and authors in this changing context wanted novels that would address their theological and practical concerns. Two of the factors I have discussed as effects of the Second Great Awakening on Protestant Christian thought can be connected back to the standard account of the rise of the novel: a greater emphasis on the development of the individual believer and attention to the everyday, historically-located content of their lives. The rise of the popular Christian novel at mid-century can be credited to this confluence of factors.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the needs of these readers and authors remained importantly distinct from their secular counterparts. As religious subjects in an increasingly secular

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<sup>14</sup> He also explains the way in which the interdenominational holiness movement became a part of the middle-class identity that Jane Tompkins, Richard Brodhead and others have linked to the importance of Christian fiction during this period: "In the increasingly unwieldy social makeup coming to define the urban middle class, the normative Victorian attitudes governing Christian propriety, morality, and duty had absorbed the visible emotionalism that marked holiness worship among the rural and poor, transforming holiness fervor into an energized yet genteel piety that suffused ordinary life, raising the bar of middle-class moral conduct and social stewardship and integrating and spiritualizing such civic values as benevolence, social intervention, and self-improvement into everyday routines." Jackson 126. Jane P Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> On the infiltration of Arminian thought into Congregationalist and Presbyterian circles, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Candy Gunther Brown identifies the 1850s as the decade in which the evangelical Protestant press became decidedly friendlier to religious fiction. Brown 97. Certainly, Sunday-school narratives had been in circulation for several decades in pamphlet and serial form (and often bound volumes of what had been independently circulated narratives) and while the narrative differences between these forms and the novel are subtle and nuanced there is a distinct difference in the religious novel's investment in explicating character and setting that distinguishes it from the Sunday-school narrative.



context, they needed novels that would remain Aristotelian in outlook, allowing them to engage with the particulars of their contemporary context while also using these particulars to instigate an epiphany in which the matter of modern living is revealed to be part of a larger order.

Many of Stowe's contemporaries thought the task impossible on theological grounds. From a Reformed perspective, the activity of fiction was highly questionable: its efforts to reveal a "truth of things" looked much like revelation divested of value—a revelation merely of man's ability as author. Scripture was the only truly creative language, thanks to the sanctifying presence of the Spirit. Words might give shape to the Spirit, but the Spirit also invested the Word at the level of authorship and again at the level of reading, making its meaning doubly dependent on a transcendent source. Though many champions of religious fiction cited the parables as a sanctioned biblical precedent for their efforts, a critical and vocal mass remained committed to the idea that Scripture was the only language that could deal in hypotheticals or created worlds since the reality it made was always underwritten.<sup>17</sup>

Stowe was not such a skeptic. In her fiction she turned away from the Calvinist orthodoxy that condemned the fictive abuse of language and toward a more Christocentric and humanist Protestantism that embraced fiction as a means of reaching a wider,

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<sup>17</sup> In his pamphlet, *Religious Novels: An Argument Against Their Use*, contemporary Charles Wesley Andrews offers the following distinction: "The parable is a method of teaching in which, as the word imports, one thing is thrown alongside of another thing to illustrate it. Usually some Gospel truth is hereby illustrated from some visible facts of the natural world. In these short illustrations, commonly extending to but a few lines, the reader does not take the facts, or incidents employed as themselves the truth which is intended to be taught. In this respect they are akin to the fable, where there is a perfect consciousness of the distinctness of the vehicle from the intended lesson. Whereas, in the religious novel, the doctrine, or moral intended to be taught, is so perfectly blended with its fictitious vehicle, that the distinction is not only lost sight of, but the fictitious vehicle itself puts in a claim of credence, which claim, if resisted, destroys the chief interest of the book." C.W. Andrews, *Religious Novels: An Argument Against Their Use*, 2<sup>nd</sup> enlarged edition (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1856) 9.

more broadly Christian audience. While certainly she deplored the licentious worlds depicted in the novels of Eugene Sue and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the favorite scapegoats of orthodox religious critics, she by no means thought their work set the precedent for the genre. Instead, she thought novels could provide an entry point to the most important book ever written. In her preface to brother Charles Beecher's recreation of the life of Christ, she explains:

No one ever hears of the Virgin Mary without forming some kind of an image or conception of her, it may be, borrowed from some antiquated engraving or old church painting, the fruit of monkish reverie or of artistic inspiration; or it may be that there is only a kind of formless mist connected with the sound of that name. But neither the formless mist nor the antique effigy are a whit nearer to the reality than the conception of one who, knowing the strong national peculiarities of her race, and gathering all the intimations of Scripture touching her descent, character, and external position, should embody to himself, as nearly as possible, the *probable* truth of the case. A reasonable probability, though not like certainty, is still worthy of a good degree of attention and confidence.<sup>18</sup>

Fiction does not disrupt the historical certainty of the birth of Christ, nor can it possibly detract from the spiritual significance of that event: instead, it reflects the impulse of the God-given human mind to imagine Christ's time on earth. Imagination clearly has its limits, however: Charles recreates the scenes of Christ's life, but does not attempt to originate his speech since "the author could not hope to achieve what even Milton failed to accomplish, viz., to represent worthily, unassisted by the direct inspiration of the Holy Ghost, the words of one wholly divine."<sup>19</sup> The function of fiction as Stowe considers it here is to give the reader a perspective from which to consider the facts of history as facts

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<sup>18</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, 'Introductory Essay', in *The Incarnation: Or, Pictures of the Virgin and Her Son* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849). vi.

<sup>19</sup> Stowe, "Introductory Essay" vii.

of eternity, a perspective that replicates the experience of reading Scripture rather than positing a new order of meaning inherent to the fictional text itself.<sup>20</sup>

As Stowe explains it, religious fiction does more than simply make history visible. Making the Virgin Mary a historical character shows us the mores of a particular place and time, but her identity as a historical character is also already religious: her depiction is meant to prompt awe at the fact that the particulars of her life and the cultural moment more generally were already accounted for in a larger scheme.<sup>21</sup> Compare this way of thinking with Georg Lukács's characterization of the function of the type in realism:

The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type a type is not its average quality, nor its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme

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<sup>20</sup> Like many of her contemporaries, Stowe was comfortable with thinking about the Bible as a historical document, thanks to a generation of biblical criticism following the German example, and the generally positive climate in America towards scientific empiricism. For more on how this empiricism influenced scriptural hermeneutics, see George M. Marsden, "Everyone One's Own Interpreter?: The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," *The Bible in America*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982): 79-100. Mark A. Noll's account of the "literal, Reformed hermeneutic" dominating antebellum Americans' reading of Scripture, the product of an alliance between commonsense philosophy, Edwardsian intuition, and republican ideology remains definitive: Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Although typology had been a feature of Christian thought since the Church Fathers, its importance in a Reformed context had to do with the new emphasis placed on the life of the individual believer. For more on the transition to this mode of valuing ordinary life as spiritual practice, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, part I; and *Sources of the Self*, part III; and Weber. Sacvan Bercovitch explains the function of Reformed typology as a means of resolving the life of the believer into an ongoing, sacral history: "Sacred history did not end, after all, with the Bible; it became the task of typology to define the course of the church ('spiritual Israel') and of the exemplary Christian life. In this view Christ, the 'antitype,' stood at the center of history, casting His shadow forward to the end of time as well as backward across the Old Testament. Every believer was a *typus* or *figura Christi*, and the church's peregrination, like that of old Israel, was at once recapitulative and adumbrative. In temporal terms, the perspective changed from anticipation to hindsight. But in the eye of eternity, the Incarnation enclosed everything that preceded and followed it in an everlasting present." Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). 36.

presentation of their extremes, rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs.<sup>22</sup>

What realist fiction shows us in a secular context, as though for the first time, is the very fact of history: meaning as it inheres in events.<sup>23</sup> In a Reformed religious epistemology things are different: fiction stands in an analogous relation to history with respect to another order of which they are both expressions. Jackson characterizes the differences between the representational claims of secular and religious realism as follows:

Realism, as Roman Jakobson famously contends, works metonymically, utilizing “synecdochical details” to capture the reality of particular characters and then moving both “from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time.” The realist novelist thus tends to work by selecting representative cases to reveal a social truth about the whole. Homiletic exercises, on the other hand, do not posit absolutes in or about the social world. Instead, they work more through metaphor, through the recognition of the similarity between two different realms altogether. That is, they engage the material through experiential templates in an effort to illuminate the spiritual conditions of the real that reside beyond the empirical.<sup>24</sup>

One consequence of this way of thinking is that it refuses history as the ultimate guarantor or standard of literary representation. Feminist scholarship on sentiment and

<sup>22</sup> Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, and Gorki, and Other* (London: Hillway Publishing Co., 1950). 6.

<sup>23</sup> Fredric Jameson’s formulation remains a classic articulation of this phenomenon, describing the work of fiction as a socially symbolic, and thus historically referential act: “[Fiction] articulates its own situation and textualizes it, thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text, that there never was any extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it in the form of a mirage. One does not have to argue the reality of history: necessity, like Dr. Johnson’s stone, does that for us. That history—Althusser’s “absent cause”, Lacan’s “Real”—is *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization. Thus, to insist on either of the two inseparable yet incommensurable dimensions of the symbolic act without the other: to overemphasize the active way in which the text reorganizes its subtext (in order, presumably, to reach the triumphant conclusion that the ‘referent’ does not exist); or on the other hand to stress the imaginary status of the symbolic act so completely as to completely reify its social ground, now no longer understood as a subtext but merely as some inert given that the text passively or fantasmatically ‘reflects’—to overstress either of these functions of the symbolic act at the expense of the other is surely to produce sheer ideology, whether it be, as in the first alternative, the ideology of structuralism, or in the second, that of vulgar materialism.” Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). 67.

<sup>24</sup> Jackson 13.

affect has long recognized this fact, giving us a useful vocabulary for interrogating realism as a singular or monolithic term.<sup>25</sup> The shortcomings of such work are typically twofold, however: religion is often treated as a type of content, the optional subject of discussion rather than as a structuring epistemology, and literary form is assumed to be didactic and thus non-reflexive.<sup>26</sup> In this analysis, form is treated much as Stowe's critics treated her novel, as something inert that transcribes history in a straightforward way.

What I want to propose is thinking about form also from a historical perspective, but one that identifies a moment in which form was not only a mirror to and mode of reflecting upon history. This moment is qualitatively different from our own—approaching it historically is perhaps not ideal. Yet, by looking at a moment in which history was not the ultimate horizon of meaning for literature, nor literature for history, we might better grasp our own commitment to history as a stage in the long and heterogeneous unfurling of secularism. Stowe's moment is another, in which the imagination was perceived to be “burning and God-given.”<sup>27</sup> We might do well to consider what formal license prevailed in her case and those like it. If fictional creation could express a larger order of things—if its immanent deviations were not a threat to but expressive of divine meaning—then we might ask whether our common assumptions

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<sup>25</sup> See Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Tompkins; Brodhead.

<sup>26</sup> James assumes as much, for instance, when he blames the “evangelical hostility to the novel” for the slow adoption of the perspective of the historian among the realist writers of his generation. “The Art of Fiction” 378. It has been difficult to escape the construction of history and fiction as antithetical terms, without a “modern,” mediatory, and reflexive position with respect to the work of art. The Reformed, evangelical epistemology I am outlining does not uphold this distinction, however: it enables the recognition of art, but without the proviso that creation must happen *ex nihilo*, by a self-possessed, implicitly secular subject.

<sup>27</sup> “Many, in this hard and utilitarian age, are wont to underrate the faculty of the imagination, and all that ministers and belongs thereto, as of no practical value. But, for all that, it is none the less a fact, that such a faculty does exist, burning and God-given, in many a youthful soul, and, for the want of some proper aliment, seeks the strange fire from heathen altars, and culls poisonous fruits and flowers from hot-beds of the god of this world. Even for this fallen and too often erring child of heaven there is, however, bread enough to spare in a Father's house.” Stowe, “Introductory Essay” viii.

about the philosophical and theological underpinnings of reflexive language hold true. If the imagination could never properly violate God's order and if its ultimate criterion was not being true to history but to the thing history expresses what strange formalisms might we find in attending to its products?

When Stowe discusses her character types in *The Key*, for instance, she manifests a tendency to re-invent them, a process she also presents as an empirical explanation of her sources. She treats her creations as facts, analogous to the facts of history they purportedly reflect. Thus we are told that Augustine St. Clare is a figure for the "democratic" man, found "in all countries" (61); Miss Ophelia is "the representative of a numerous class of the very best of Northern people" (51); while Marie St. Clare is the "type of a class of women not peculiar to any latitude, nor any condition of society" (57). In an era when many recognized fiction as a legitimate way of recounting social history such claims are not entirely surprising.<sup>28</sup> But Stowe does more than legitimate fiction's claims to truth through history. She makes her characters speak as facts of history:

When Marie St. Clare has the misfortune to live in a free State, there is no end to her troubles. Her cook is always going off for better and more comfortable wages and more comfortable quarters; her chambermaid, strangely enough, won't agree to be chambermaid and seamstress both for half wages, and so she deserts. Marie's kitchen-cabinet, therefore, is always in a state of revolution; and she often declares, with affecting earnestness, that servants are the torment of her life. If her husband endeavor to remonstrate, or suggest another mode of treatment, he is hard-hearted, unfeeling man; "he doesn't love her, and she always knew he didn't;" and so he is disposed of. (57-8)

In treating Marie as a social type the passage points us back to the world she stands for.

Such an explanation does not account for the way in which, as an articulation of social fact, Marie begins speaking since when she does we are aware that we are looking at a

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<sup>28</sup> For more on the perceived socio-historical "science" of the historical romance and its contemporary critics, see George Dekker, *The American Historical Romance*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

novelistic character well on her way to becoming another. We can't help but wonder at what point this free-state-abiding Marie will differentiate past the point of no return. And because we wonder, we are especially aware of the "turns" in the passage by which this new Marie emerges.

This fit of creation hardly upholds the characterization of *The Key* as a one-dimensional defense of empiricism. Stowe is not being anti-empirical in this passage either and this is the more difficult point. Marie is a fictional template ontologically identical to the fact in history in that both express a moral order of things: the selfish wife in all places and times, her selfishness as an inescapable aspect of the burdened human condition, etc. Her realization in fiction is therefore no less true than her realization in history. What interests me is how this typical epistemology makes Marie "live" in the text. Barely needing an excuse to get going, Stowe is well on her way to turning out another character in a different context—a process she also understands as explaining her "sources" for Marie's character. This could only be possible if she held fiction and history to be homologous, in which case playing Marie out in language expresses but does not disturb the real thing Marie is, which is not a fact in history although it might be expressed there are well.

A closer look at *The Key* reveals not only Stowe's sustained interest in re-inventing her characters, but also the particular narrative mode by which she can proceed without threatening the double fidelity of her types to what they have been in the novel and to what they are in history. In a chapter on protective acts, for instance, she re-uses Simon Legree to illustrate the likely outcome of a certain statute in South Carolina. If enacted, this law holds masters accountable for the maltreatment of their slaves. We are

presented with a hypothetical scene in which “a” Legree, owner of a progressive and rebellious slave named Tom, stands in court for reported abuse:

Let us imagine a scene:--Legree, standing carelessly with his hands in his pockets, rolling a quid of tobacco in his mouth; Justice Dogberry, seated, in all the majesty of law, reinforced by a decanter of whiskey and some tumblers, intended to assist in illuminating the intellect in such obscure cases.

*Justice Dogberry.* Come, gentlemen, take a little something, to begin with. Mr. Legree, sit down; sit down, Mr.—a what’s-your-name?—Mr. Shallow.

Mr. Legree and Mr. Shallow each sit down, and take their tumbler of whiskey and water. After some little conversation, the justice introduces the business as follows:—

“Now about this nigger business. Gentlemen, you know the act of—um—um—where the deuce *is* that act [*Fumbling an old law book.*] How plagued did you ever hear of that act, Shallow? I’m sure I’m forgot all about it; --Oh! here ‘tis. Well, Mr. Shallow, the Act says you must make proof, you observe.

*Mr. Shallow.* [*Stuttering and hesitating.*] Good laud! why, don’t everybody see that them ar niggers are most starved? Only see how ragged they are!

*Justice.* I can’t say I’ve observed it particular. Seem to be very well contented.

*Shallow.* [*Eagerly.*] But just ask Pomp, or Sambo, or Dinah, or Tom!

*Justice Dogberry.* [*With dignity.*] I’m astonished at you, Mr. Shallow! You think of producing negro testimony? I hope I know the law better than that! We must have direct proof, you know.

Shallow is posed; Legree significantly takes another tumbler of whiskey and water, and Justice Dogberry gives a long ahe-a-um. After a few moments the justice speaks:—

“Well, after all, I suppose, Mr. Legree, you wouldn’t have any objections to swarin’ off; that settles it all, you know.”

As swearing is what Mr. Legree is rather more accustomed to than anything else that could be named, a more appropriate termination of the affair could not be suggested; and he swears, accordingly, to any extent, and with any fullness and variety of oath that could be desired; and thus the little affair terminates. But it does not terminate thus for Tom or Sambo, Dinah, or any others who have been alluded to for authority. What will happen to them, when Mr. Legree comes home, had better be left to conjecture. (174-5)

The dramatic staging of the scene heightens our awareness of the active qualities of its types, Shakespearean and otherwise—activity that moves the scene and its players, but



without adding any psychological depth.<sup>29</sup> We have an emergent Legree, the redaction of his character in the novel, developing in a way that does not disrupt either of the extrinsic realities he stands for, novelistic or historical. He moves in a superficial and oddly mechanistic way of which we are hyper-aware since as with Marie we are looking for the point at which he will become another character, bound to this particular context and thus severed from the other orders of meaning he represents. While this is an odd moment, it shows us something important about textual development in a typical epistemology, how narrative can be quite active without disrupting a doubled order of extrinsic standards. The text can be remarkably “live” even when what it represents is by all other standards static.

This mode of textual development is the expression of a typical epistemology, the realism of a religious and incipiently secular moment. This mode is active in constructing worlds, but without fully investing in the autonomy of the world it has created; the text is not its ultimate ontological horizon. It is, in other words, a strange formalism: an awareness of what language does as language without the necessary corollary that such reflexivity leads to a break with an extrinsic epistemology. For the three Christian best-selling novels of the nineteenth century this strange formalism was the literal ground of the epiphany that modern religion fiction needed to deliver. That epiphany had to do with

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<sup>29</sup> Wolfgang Iser discusses the immediacy of novelistic dialogue, and its attendant “reality effect” in the modernist novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett as follows: “The configurations formed by the dialogue therefore have a strangely indeterminate nature, though this does not mean they are any the less real. They convey the individual outline of the character, together with the hitherto untapped potential of his reactions—and this potential could not possibly be conveyed if his individuality were defined once and for all.” Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press [1974]). 247. Obviously, Stowe does not have a modernist agenda. But she may have a modernist’s sense of technique, which is more interesting.

For more on the pervasive influence of Shakespeare in America, see Lawrence W Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), and Kim C Sturgess, *Shakespeare and the American Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

the matter of the lives of the faithful—their historical identities, as realized in novel form. In the same way that reading Scripture revealed the historically embedded position of the believer to be part of a larger order of things, reading these novels revealed that what seemed to be internally autonomous development in the text was already part of an encompassing truth, no matter which way the text turned.

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I begin with Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), the work most often credited with inaugurating the genre of the best-selling Protestant novel in America. Following a decline in family fortune, Warner had a powerful conversion experience, joining the Mercer Street Presbyterian Church in New York with her sister Anna in 1844. She also became a visitor for the New York Tract Society and thus would have been familiar with the story lines and characters standard to the evangelical Sunday-school genre, which experienced a significant boom during the antebellum period.<sup>30</sup> *The Wide, Wide World* foregrounds its affiliations with this genre in the opening chapter: little Ellen Montgomery is told that her mother must depart on a journey to recover her health, leaving Ellen, with her overpowering emotions and deep attachments, without clear moral guidance. Ellen's mother will of course not return from this voyage; the little orphan will be left to find her own way to God.<sup>31</sup> The 1892 Lippincott edition sets out the

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<sup>30</sup> For more on the role of religious tract circulation and its impact on general modes of print production in America, see Nord. On the Sunday-school print industry, see Brown. On the religious activity of the Warners, see Edward Halsey Foster, *Susan and Anna Warner* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> For more on this plotline as a typical frame for woman's fiction during the mid-nineteenth century, see Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). The orphan in Christ template was not gender specific in the evangelical context, however.

narrative frame in its headpiece: little Ellen, clutching her Bible, is half-embraced by a female angel, while the first letter of the text, m for mamma, is inscribed on a tombstone. At the outset of the novel we not only have the essential lines of a standard plot, we are also reminded that the novel will deal with a biblical precept—that while in life we are always in death.

If the novel promises a standard pedagogical exercise at its outset, the first chapter takes a turn that marks its signal difference from typical Sunday-school fare. After Ellen is told that her mother will leave her she engages in deep and seemingly directionless reflection—hardly a Sunday-school convention. Looking out from her room at scenes that used to enchant her, we are told,

She could not bear to look at them; she felt as if it made her sick; and turning away her eyes, she lifted them to the bright sky above her head, and gazed into its clear depth of blue till she almost forgot that there was such a thing as a city in the world. Little white clouds were chasing across it, driven by the fresh wind that was blowing away Ellen's hair from her face, and cooling her hot cheeks. That wind could not have been long in coming from the place of woods and flowers, it was so sweet still. Ellen looked till, she didn't know why, she felt calm and soothed,—as if somebody was saying to her, softly, "Cheer up, my child, cheer up; things are not as bad as they might be; things will be better."<sup>32</sup>

Ellen's experience in this moment is pursued seemingly for its own sake, without being resolved into a pedagogical frame. The passage moves ever closer to a direct rendering of her consciousness, and the line "That wind could not have been long in coming from the place of woods and flowers, it was still so sweet" is certainly her thinking. This, in turn, prompts the signal moment of the passage: "Ellen looked till, *she didn't know why*, she felt calm and soothed."

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<sup>32</sup> Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1987). 16. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

No one in Sunday-school literature thinks something without knowing why—such unattached affect hardly makes a memorable lesson. Here, the dash and the final clause remedy the situation: Ellen's turn in thought is revealed to be the result of divine comforting. While this might resolve the sentence as a whole, it does not resolve our experience in reading it.<sup>33</sup> The lesson thus relies on a moment that won't change, the real absence of explanation. This is what will make *The Wide, Wide World* so powerful: following the development of a central consciousness, the novel is willing to take on the gaps that such development might produce between experience as it is progressively unfolded in the text and a pedagogical frame.

Following the death of her mother, Ellen's unexplained emotions increasingly center on one figure: John Humphreys. In their first interaction, he prompts feelings in her that will, though deepening over the course of the novel, never be fully disclosed. Surprising his sister Alice, who has taken Ellen into the family circle, John temporarily displaces the latter in Alice's attention:

And then she stood with her back to the brother and sister, looking into the fire, as if she was determined not to see them till she couldn't help it. But what she was thinking of, Ellen could not have told, then or afterwards. It was but a few minutes, though it seemed to her a great many, before they drew near the fire. Curiosity began to be strong, and she looked round to see if the new-comer was like Alice. No, not a bit,—how different!—darker hair and eyes—not a bit like her; handsome enough, too, to be her brother. And Alice did not look like herself; her usually calm sweet face was quivering and sparkling now,—lit up as Ellen had never seen it,—oh, how bright! Poor Ellen herself had never looked duller in her life; and when Alice said gaily, "This is my brother, Ellen"—her confusion of thoughts and feelings resolved themselves into a flood of tears; she sprang and hid her face in Alice's arms. (274)

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<sup>33</sup> In the words of Paul Ricœur, who objects to "achronological" readings of narrative, like those of Roland Barthes, "In a word, the correlation between thought and plot supersedes the 'then' and 'and then' of mere succession. But it would be a complete mistake to consider such a 'thought' as achronological." "The Human Experience of Time and Narrative," in *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 110.

The explanation for Ellen's confusion is simple enough: John threatens her position in Alice's affections, and, attractive enough himself, he poses another, sublimated threat. Yet this explanation is never given. Ellen is sent out of the room for the maid, and the incident is passed over. In a novel that makes so much of Ellen's words and deeds the omission is striking; yet it marks the beginning of Ellen's transformation from one type, the orphan in God, into another.<sup>34</sup> Once the plot of Ellen's mother's death has been fulfilled the narrative must adhere to another, and with the Humphreys' adoption of the little orphan into their family circle a romance between John and Ellen seems inevitable, with Ellen becoming the heroine of the marriage plot standard to the contemporary domestic novel.

Yet *The Wide, Wide World* resists this trajectory as much as it sets it in motion. Ellen's preoccupation with John is never entirely revealed to the reader, preventing the full development of a romance. Instead, she develops a private mental existence, particularly after Alice's death, of which her adopted brother is unmistakably the inspiration. In one of the many scenes in which her behavior is observed, a friend of the Humphreys comments,

Did you observe her last night, Matilda, when John Humphreys came in? you were talking to her at the moment;—I saw her, before the door was opened,—I saw the color come and her eye sparkle, but she did not look toward him for an instant till you had finished what you were saying to her and she had given, as she always does, her modest quiet answer; and then her eye went straight as an arrow to where he was standing. (476)

The sparkle in Ellen's eye gives the game away: she is the type who is not one—the recognizably modern heroine of the female *Bildungsroman*, whose experience of

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<sup>34</sup> In explaining the novel's ongoing appeal to secular audiences, Jane Tompkins hits upon a crucial point: "To read *The Wide, Wide World* is to experience life as if everything that happened to you, every thought that passed through your mind, every feeling you ever had, deserved the most minute consideration." Afterword, *ibid.* 597.

something even as ordinary as love is impressed with something ineffable and irreducibly unique.<sup>35</sup>

Ellen has transformed, but in a context peopled by other stock types, the most important being John Humphreys himself. Rather than reading her development as something that threatens the typical epistemology of the novel, we must instead look to the figure that prompts her transformation. John Humphreys is resolutely typical: the good pilgrim and model Christian. We see this in the language he uses to describe himself. For instance, during one of their many tearful partings (on Ellen's side at least), he addresses her: "My little pilgrim, I hope you will keep the straight road, and win the praise of the servant who was faithful over a few things" (354). Both Bunyan's Christian and the servant from the parable of the talents are types of the Christian Everyman. John and Ellen's developing romance is thus coded as a kind of Bunyanesque life-journey towards Christ in which the most ordinary of domestic occurrences, the prelude to a marriage, is replete with salvific possibility. Like Bunyan's Evangelist, who trains Christian until he is able to act as a guide to Faithful, John is the model pilgrim who reveals Ellen's true calling to herself since in him her worldly ties are also the stuff of her spiritual progress

As the novel turns towards romance, Ellen's human love for John seems to spell the end of her typicality and the beginnings of her life as a novelistic character. This love prompts feelings that cannot be revealed to the reader and which appear pedagogically

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<sup>35</sup> I am not arguing that Warner set out to achieve this turn by deflecting the romance between Ellen and John. On the contrary, and returning to my original point about the novel's affiliation with Sunday-school literature, it seems obvious that a romance between Ellen and John cannot become the novel's primary subject because it would break with pedagogical convention. My point is simply that Warner follows the consequences of not allowing the novel to fully become a romance, which, in turn, produces a provocative development in Ellen's character.

purposeless. Yet, as the narrative reveals John to be a model and modern pilgrim, we see that his typicality makes hers legible: she, too, is a modern Christian, more modern indeed for her complicated worldly ties to John. While she appears to develop an earthbound individuality in the form of loving God's creature better than Himself, John is the figure who reveals that this growth is still a function of the straight road. Her relationship with this model pilgrim is what transforms the landscape of the novel into a parable without reducing the content of its novelistic detail. The epiphany of the novel is therefore its ending in which what by all appearances is simply a marriage of the kind one might find in any contemporary domestic novel is revealed to be a union of a distinctly modern believer to her spiritual guide on earth. This resolution explains but does not change the privacy of Ellen's feelings or our first encounter with these feelings in reading. It is the combination of these gaps and the novel's ending that allows Ellen to truly be the type of us since what appears to be an autonomous experience of affect is revealed to always have been part of a meaningful structure.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* works through an analogous logic, developing its types into characters (by no means consistently) and then insisting that these characters have been types all along. The opening scene reveals the formal means by which this will work:

Late in the afternoon of a chilly day in February, two gentlemen were sitting alone over their wine, in a well-furnished dining parlor, in the town of P—, in Kentucky. There were no servants present, and the gentlemen, with chairs closely approaching, seemed to be discussing some subject with great earnestness.

For convenience sake, we have said, hitherto, two *gentlemen*. One of the parties, however, when critically examined, did not seem, strictly speaking, to come under the species. He was a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features, and that swaggering air of pretension which marks a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world. He was much over-dressed, in a gaudy vest of many colors, a blue neckerchief, bedropped gaily with yellow spots, and arranged with a

flaunting tie, quite in keeping with the general air of the man. His hands, large and coarse, were plentifully bedecked with rings; and he wore a heavy gold watch-chain, with a bundle of seals of portentous size, and a great variety of colors attached to it,—which, in the ardor of conversation, he was in the habit of flourishing and jingling with evident satisfaction. His conversation was in free and easy defiance of Murray’s Grammar, and was garnished at convenient intervals with various profane expressions, which not even the desire to be graphic in our account shall induce us to transcribe.<sup>36</sup>

The slave trader Haley is the parvenu and his speech, “garnished at convenient intervals” with profanity, encourages a double reading. On the one hand, “convenient” denotes Haley’s own attitude towards his speech, a self-conscious performance in “defiance” of Murray’s Grammar. On the other, it marks the narrator’s attention to the style of Haley’s presentation in the text: his speech befits the elaborate portrait we have of him in the rest of the paragraph. “Convenient” thus reminds us that Haley is a fiction, a made thing, without threatening the idea that there are real instances of parvenudom that also guarantee his existence. It is Haley’s solidity *as* a made thing in this double sense that allows the narrator to claim that we won’t hear his “real” speech at all. This claim suggests that there is an order of things in which Haley participates as a fiction, to which the novel as a whole will remain faithful, which even the subsequent turns in his speech couldn’t threaten.<sup>37</sup>

I draw attention to this scene because it explains the brilliantly heterogeneous nature of Stowe’s novel. Readers are often tempted to separate developed characters like Augustine St. Clare and Cassy from types like Eva or Simon Legree. The opening scene makes clear, however, that the energy of the novel will come from playing static knowledge out in the active form of narrative. What happens when you have little

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<sup>36</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994). 1. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to Myra Jehlen for drawing my attention to the interesting dynamic at work in this passage.



evangelists masquerading as children is the same as what happens when a Haley or a Simon Legree is in a room speaking or crying over a long-lost mother, and the same again as an internally divided St. Clare tearing up at the admonitions of a faithful Tom. It's a fixed order of knowledge that threatens, through narrative unfolding, to become something else, something too dependent on language to be separated from it. In its central character, however, we see how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presents another option, in which particular narrative development does not threaten but rather expresses an extrinsic order of meaning.

Tom is often dismissed as one-dimensional, and while he is no Augustine or Cassy he does experience a genesis of characterization in the novel. Initially he is a recognizable minstrel type: "child-like", "humble," and "confiding," he is the loyal and unsuspecting slave, whose brand of Methodism and "praying right up" would have been familiar to a generation of readers that had witnessed the aftermath of John Wesley's advent in America.<sup>38</sup> Once separated from his family and launched into the wider world, however, he develops through his encounters with the atrocities of slavery. En route with Haley, for instance, he observes the trader stealing a child from its mother in her sleep in

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<sup>38</sup> Wesley first visited America in 1736, and with a more Arminian theology than the traditional Calvinism espoused by other popular and populist figure like Whitefield, made great inroads with the African-American population. Mark A. Noll estimates that by 1813, as many as one million people (or one out of every eight Americans) attended a Methodist camp meeting each year. Noll 168. On the beginnings of the A.M.E. Church, see Hatch, chapter four.

Although Stowe began the novel with a vision of Tom's death, it is clear that this moment did not provide her with any depth in imagining the development of his character from beginning to end. According to her son, "It was in the month of February [...] that Mrs. Stowe was seated at communion service in the college church at Brunswick. Suddenly, like the unrolling of a picture, the scene of the death of Uncle Tom passed before her mind. So strongly was she affected that it was with difficulty she could keep from weeping aloud. Immediately on returning home she took a pen and paper and wrote out the vision which had been as it were blown into her mind as by the rushing of a mighty wind." Charles Edward Stowe, *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, The Gale Library of Lives and Letters American Writers Series, 2nd ed (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1889). 148.

order to avoid the drama of parting. Upon waking, the woman is in a paroxysm of despair, which Tom attempts to quell:

Tom drew near, and tried to say something; but she only groaned. Honestly, and with tears running down his own cheeks, he spoke of a heart of love in the skies, of a pitying Jesus, and an eternal home; but the ear was deaf with anguish, and the palsied heart could not feel.

Night came on,—night calm, unmoved, and glorious, shining down with her innumerable and solemn eyes, twinkling, beautiful, but silent. There was no speech nor language, no pitying voice nor helping hand, from the distant sky. One after another, the voices of business or pleasure died away; all on the boat were sleeping, and the ripples at the prow were plainly heard. (113-114)

The experience in the second paragraph is Tom's: that of a world in which God appears silent. Although this is not an articulation of doubt on the order of an Augustine or a Cassy, moments like these, in which Tom witnesses atrocities that beg the question of an ultimate good, deepen his character, adding variety to the faith he manages to retain.

Augustine overtakes the middle section of the narrative, but once Tom is sold away from the St. Clare household, it is as though he inherits the problems of belief that confounded his dead master. Faced with the cruelties of Simon Legree's oversight, he experiences doubt on an order of magnitude unprecedented in the novel:

The gloomiest problem of this mysterious life was constantly before his eyes,—souls crushed and ruined, evil triumphant, and God silent. It was weeks and months that Tom wrestled, in his own soul, in darkness and sorrow. He thought of Miss Ophelia's letter to his Kentucky friends and would pray earnestly that God would send him deliverance. And then he would watch, day after day, in the vague hope of seeing somebody sent to redeem him; and, when nobody came, he would crush back to his soul bitter thoughts,—that it was vain to serve God, that God had forgotten him. (338)

Taunted and battered by Legree to the "lowest level at which endurance is possible,"

Tom is poised to give into despair, when he is arrested by a vision of Christ's body, first brutalized, then glorified in light, accompanied by a voice which tells him: "He that

overcometh shall sit down with me on my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father on his throne” (340).<sup>39</sup>

Leaving the question of the ontology of the vision aside, my focus here will be on how it impacts Tom’s development as a character.<sup>40</sup> In the light of this visionary illumination, the complexity that I have argued he has gained as a novelistic character recedes, and he takes on the lineaments of another typical identity. In the remainder of his (brief) life in the novel, he literally becomes Christ and the language of the narrative shifts around him from realism into parable.<sup>41</sup> He ministers to the plantation now as the silent stranger:

It is true, opportunities were scanty; but, on the way to the fields, and back again, and during the hours of labor, chances fell in his way of extending a helping-hand to the weary, the disheartened and discouraged. The poor, worn-down, brutalized creatures, at first, could scarce comprehend this; but, when it was continued week after week, and month after month, it began to awaken long-silent chords in their benumbed hearts. Gradually and imperceptibly the strange, silent, patient man, who was ready to bear every one’s burden, and sought help from none,—who stood aside for all, and came last, and took least, yet was foremost to share his little all with any who needed,—the man who, in cold nights, would give up his tattered blanket to add to the comfort of some woman who shivered with sickness, and who filled the baskets of the weaker ones in the field, at the terrible risk of coming short of his own measure,—and who, though pursued with unrelenting cruelty by their common tyrant, never joined in uttering a word of reviling or cursing,—this man, at last, began to have a strange power over them; and, when the more pressing season was past, and they were allowed again their Sundays for their own use, many would gather together to hear from him of Jesus. They would gladly have met to hear, and pray, and sing, in some place, together; but Legree would not permit it, and more than once broke up such attempts, with oaths and brutal execrations,—so that the blessed news had to circulate from individual to individual. (342-343)

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<sup>39</sup> The verse is Revelation 3:21.

<sup>40</sup> If we put Stowe’s “inspired” vision of Tom’s death together with her defense of visions among religiously-inclined African-Americans in *The Key* (quite Jamesian in its way), then I think we must accede that her conception of the vision did not entail a complete break with empiricism.

<sup>41</sup> The best precursor for this mode in Stowe’s oeuvre is her short piece, “The Freeman’s Dream: A Parable,” published in 1850 in the *National Era*.

The passage is striking for its overall shift in tone away from novelistic particularity and towards the more generalized mode of the parable. Tom loses his name, as do the other slaves, revealing the narrative that has existed all along as a form of potential: the imminent coming of Christ. This narrative cannot fundamentally alter even as it takes on specific lineaments in the novel itself. Indeed when the novel reveals this narrative at work it has the corollary effect of reframing the action of the novel to this point. Yet it does so without fundamentally undoing everything that has occurred in the novel as a novel, as the scene above demonstrates. In other words, the parable absorbs the novel.

In this way, the logic of the novel replays the incarnation, giving its types or paradigmatic characters necessary flesh, only to reveal this flesh belongs to a larger order of meaning. Tom is not always a Christ: an entire novel precedes the late chapter in which he becomes the silent stranger in which he has been spiritual but firmly of this world. The epiphany of the ending is that a character who looked to be a man like any other and who the reader must experience as such is revealed as a type: a type that depends on the life developed in the novel for its fullest meaning. We see this logic in George Shelby's final injunction to the slaves he has freed in Tom's memory: "Think of your freedom, every time you see UNCLE TOM'S CABIN; and let it be a memorial to put you all in mind to follow in his steps, and be as honest and faithful and Christian as he was" (380). The cabin is the historical, novelistic content of Tom's life, which, like Christ's own flesh, had to be autonomously real in order for redemption to occur. As Christ went "all the way," so too the novel: remembering Tom means remembering his particular history, everything that gave his narrative "flesh."

History is more concertedly the subject of the last Christian best seller I will consider: Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880). Wallace's tale followed others like Joseph Holt Ingraham's *The Prince of the House of David* (1855), Henry Ward Beecher's *Life of Jesus, the Christ* (1871), and Philip Schaff's *The Person of Christ* (1865) in using the historical scene of Christ's life as an opportunity to reconnect with fundamental Christian truths—truths that, as we will see, Wallace had himself relinquished. Jackson explains how recreating Christ's time on earth in a setting as historically autonomous and complete as our own had the effect of making social action in a turbulent time more imaginable: "If Jesus was a man, his actions, while possibly superhuman, were emphatically not suprahuman."<sup>42</sup> Exploring the historical embeddedness of Christ's life on earth accentuated his humanity, making his ministrations as a man more feasible for imitation. This emphasis on Christ's humanity expressed what E. Brooks Holifield characterizes as the central theological commitments of mainstream, post-bellum Protestantism:

The new theologians were far more reluctant than their predecessors to make pronouncements about either the meaning of "eternal life" or the conditions requisite for attaining it. They embraced biblical criticism and had no reluctance in acknowledging that the Bible contained diverse layers of material, including ideas that contradicted each other, which they tended to interpret with developmental categories. They discarded any notion of biblical infallibility. They thought of God much more as a loving Father than as Sovereign Judge, and they often justified their departures from older views as proper responses to the changing "spirit of the age." Many of them adopted a "modernist principle"—an insistence that theology had to change its formulations in accord with intellectual and social change—that most antebellum theologians would have resisted.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jackson 177. He also discusses some of the factors affecting late-nineteenth-century congregations that created the felt need for social action, and a return to fundamental values. These included, among others, the looming problem of poverty in a "fast-paced age of industry" and rapid scientific advancement. 159.

<sup>43</sup> Holifield 507-508.

Lives of Christ were resolutely historical, and oriented towards the possibilities of human action in their efforts to recreate Christ's humanity as a model. As the nation reacted to the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, with the social world reformulating under the pressure of what Amy Kaplan characterizes as "urban-industrial transformation," new realities such as urban poverty, class antagonism, and ongoing racial violence were both insistent and unprecedented.<sup>44</sup> Institutional religion struggled from under the burden of its involvement in the political crisis of the War to continue to justify theology, but readers and believers increasingly looked to extra-denominational spiritual aids such as the novel to imagine how living in the spirit of Christ would look in this new era. Imagining Christ in a historical landscape as hard and definitively real as the reader's own offered the promise of a productive analogy, with historical detail simultaneously widening the distance between the time of the believer and that of Christ while at the same time attaching new meaning to that distance.

Wallace pays painstaking attention to the scene of history in his novel, making that history itself the primary challenge the modern believer must now face in coming to Christ.<sup>45</sup> His protagonist, Judah Ben-Hur, is trapped for most of the novel within a pre-

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<sup>44</sup> Kaplan maintains that the "weightiness" of descriptive detail in the post-bellum realist text does not indicate confidence in the solidity of social order, but rather its opposite: "This study opens with the premise that the urban-industrial transformation of nineteenth-century society did not provide a ready-made setting which the realistic novel reflects, but that these changes radically challenged the accessibility of an emergent modern world to literary representation. Realism simultaneously becomes an imperative and a problem in American fiction. [...] Realists show a surprising lack of confidence in the capacity of fiction to reflect a solid world "out there," not because of the inherent slipperiness of signification but because of their distrust in the significance of the social. They often assume a world which lacks solidity, and the weightiness of descriptive detail—one of the most common characteristics of the realist text—often appears in inverse proportion to a sense of insubstantiality, as though description could pin down the objects of an unfamiliar world to make it real." Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 8-9.

<sup>45</sup> To tell the story of early Christianity, Wallace engaged in years of research, evident in the novel's self-conscious descriptions of locales and local customs. His autobiography recounts these efforts, as well as his deep satisfaction upon discovering the "accuracy" of his surmises, in a visit to the Holy Land later in life: "I started on foot from Bethany, proceeding over the exact route followed by my hero, [...]. At every point

Christian epistemology, the primary obstacle to his acceptance of the kingdom of souls that Christ both promises and represents. His identity as Sadducean Jew is treated as typical and determinative, preventing his proper understanding of what Christ makes possible:

Because, it may have been, nothing is so easy as denial of an idea not agreeable to our wishes, he rejected the definition given by Balthasar of the kingdom the king was coming to establish. A kingdom of souls, if not intolerable to his Sadducean faith, seemed to him but an abstraction drawn from the depths of a devotion too fond and dreamy. A kingdom of Judea, on the other hand, was more than comprehensible: such had been, and, if only for that reason, might be again. And it suited his pride to think of a new kingdom broader of domain, richer in power, and of a more unapproachable splendor than the old one; of a new king wiser and mightier than Solomon—a new king under whom, especially, he could find both service and revenge.<sup>46</sup>

It will take a total epistemological transformation to make the kingdom of souls visible to Judah, since “that which we will not see” the narrator tells us, “he could not” (247).

This is a different context from that which we have seen in Warner and Stowe’s novels. Judah’s world, unlike the contemporary settings of the other works, is one in which Christ has not yet arrived. Although more distant in time, it represents a more secular social context than either of the previous works—one as fundamentally divested of Him as a world that has pronounced Him dead.<sup>47</sup> The narrative foregrounds the primary challenge for the believer in this milieu in an episode between Judah and Balthasar’s daughter, Iras. The latter tells Judah a parable, a “cure” for love, which

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of the journey over which I traced his steps to Jerusalem, I found the descriptive details true to the existing objects and scenes, and I find no reason for making a single change in the text of the book.” Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906). 937.

<sup>46</sup> Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1880). 278. All subsequent references given parenthetically. The narrator also suggests that, as a Sadducean Jew, Judah is more receptive to the idea of an unconventional savior than his Separatist brethren, who expected a military hero. The majority of the narration, however, focuses on Judah’s difficulty in imagining a kingdom of souls.

<sup>47</sup> I am not alone in reading the novel as an allegory of the contemporary scene of Wallace’s America. See Amy Kaplan for an account of the novel’s allegorization of empire: Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

pertains to Judah's growing attraction for the treacherous Egyptian. The story follows the forbidden passion of the beautiful Ne-ne-hofra, consort of the wise Orætes, who harbors a secret passion for her father's gardener, Barbec. As she wastes away, Orætes discovers the source of her ailment from an anchorite and constructs a floating island where Ne-ne-hofra and Barbec will live for a year. After this time, she returns:

“Now whom lovest thou best?” asked the king.

She kissed his cheek and said, “Take me back, O good king, for I am cured.”

Orætes laughed, none the worse, that moment, of his hundred and fourteen years.

“Then it is true, as Menopha said: ha, ha, ha! it is true, the cure of love is love.”

“Even so,” she replied.

Suddenly his manner changed, and his look became terrible.

“I did not find it so,” he said.

She shrank affrighted.

“Thou guilty!” he continued. “Thy offense to Orætes the man he forgives; but thy offense to Orætes the king remains to be punished.”

She cast herself at his feet.

“Hush!” he cried. “Thou art dead!” (269)

We can easily read Orætes' doubleness as a figure for Iras's duplicity, yet this reading does not explain the macabre urgency of the tale.<sup>48</sup> In a larger sense, it is a fable of the misrecognition of the king's two bodies, an anachronistic political ideal that Wallace uses to draw an analogy. Ne-ne-hofra's perilous mistake is to forget the king's status as the living representative of divinity; collapsing him to one register, she insures her own living death. The point is not that she ought to have respected his double nature—it is not clear this would have changed her fate. The horror of the story is rather that misrecognition is inescapable in an order where the profane and the divine are intimately and poisonously mixed. The idea here is that the king would be better for an ontological distinction between his two roles.

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<sup>48</sup> She will in the end betray Judah to his sworn enemy, the Roman Messala, returning only in the final chapter, broken in her misery, to kiss Judah's children.



The promise that comes from the interpenetration of the material sphere by the divine, so crucial to Warner and Stowe's novels, is thus missing from *Ben-Hur*. Epiphany in those novels is the revelation that the putative self-sufficiency of narrative form, the formal counterpart of the historical life of the modern believer, is already contained under a divine aegis.<sup>49</sup> *Ben-Hur*, on the other hand, depends for dramatic effect on reestablishing distinctions between the divine and the material or profane. Judah's visit to the shrine of the goddess Daphne outside Antioch foregrounds this impulse. Somewhat skeptical about the place, his anxieties once there are temporarily calmed by his overhearing that no one can be lost in Daphne—that every peregrination is part of the logic of the shrine. This is because the shrine quite literally encompasses all that transpires within its bounds, seemingly without distinction:

Suddenly a revelation dawned upon him—the Grove was, in fact, a temple—one far-reaching, wall-less temple!

Never anything like it!

The architect had not stopped to pother about columns and porticos, proportions or interiors, or any limitation upon the epic he sought to materialize; he had simply made a servant of Nature—art can go no further. (178)

Judah is arrested by wonder—until he witnesses an example of the shrine's licentiousness in the spectacle of a girl and a youth asleep in an embrace. Taken aback, he revises his opinion of the logic of the place: rather than peace without fear, it is better framed as love without law. On a formal level, the shrine manifests the same contamination as Iras's parable: making all of nature holy, it erodes the distinctions between the spiritual and the profane that are the true source of divinity's power. Judah hurries away, surveying the rest of what he sees with the "curling lip" of amused but distant tolerance.

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<sup>49</sup> For more on the long line of Puritan thinking that engendered this interpenetrative, symbolic mode of interpreting the material world, see Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). Also, Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*.

This resistance to ontological confusion is part of the historical epistemology of the novel: a pre-Christian conviction in the total sufficiency of the material realm that is a double for the historically oriented worldview of Wallace's post-bellum America. Until the final pages of the novel, Judah is thus committed to reading Christ as an incipient king on earth. At the scene of the crucifixion, however, another order of meaning is revealed:

A conception of something better than the best of this life—something so much better that it could serve a weak man with strength to endure agonies of spirit as well as of body; something to make death welcome—perhaps another life purer than this one—perhaps the spirit-life which Balthasar held to so fast, began to dawn upon his mind clearer and clearer, bringing to him a certain sense that, after all, the mission of the Nazarene was that of guide across the boundary for such as loved him; across the boundary to where his kingdom was set up and waiting for him. Then, as something borne through the air out of the almost forgotten, he heard again, or seemed to hear, the saying of the Nazarene,

“I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.”

And the words repeated themselves over and over, and took form, and the dawn touched them with its light, and filled them with a new meaning. (476-477)

Christ's death reveals a new life: one in which the kingdom on earth is not a final end.

The Nazarene is the “guide across the boundary” between life on earth and new life in heaven: his incarnated body literalizes both. As a liminal figure, however, his two bodies don't threaten the ontological claims of either realm. Instead, he invests the material with new meaning through the promise of his ongoing proximity.

The contrast between the novel's historical materialism and its few miracles has lead to its being read as predominately secular.<sup>50</sup> Yet such readings selectively ignore

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<sup>50</sup> See for instance Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971); Paul Gutjahr, “‘To the Heart of Solid Puritans’: Historicizing the Popularity of Ben-Hur,” *Mosaic* 26.3 (1993): 53-67; and Irving McKee, “Ben-Hur” Wallace: *The Life of General Lew Wallace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947). McKee claims that Wallace selected the life of Christ as his topic because it was the subject of the “most popular book ever written,” rather than from any religious concerns (164-165).

scenes such as the crucifixion rather than evolving arguments that take the historicism of the novel and its miracles together—a synthetic reading that is necessary if we are to understand how the novel works as a progressive structure. Indeed, Wallace claims to have experienced a conversion over the course of writing his novel, indicating that for him the development of a world without Christ in language was the ground of a spiritual epiphany.<sup>51</sup> His retrospective description of his purpose in writing expresses how such an epiphany might work:

I resolved to fill [Christ's thirty years of silence] with accessory incidents which should tend to give the reader an idea of the moral, social, and political condition of the world at that period; out of which shrewd minds might evolve one of the most powerful arguments for the divinity of Christ—evolve it I say, for it would not do to say plainly that such was the object—*viz.*, that mankind in its organization and ideas of all sorts was so debased as to be past salvation except by the direct interposition of the Almighty.<sup>52</sup>

From the totality of a historical condition without Christ, “shrewd minds” might feel the need for Christ all the more powerfully. On these terms, the novel must build a world so complete that it could and does stand on its own. But this self-sufficiency has its pathos—and when Christ's body disappears into the limpid blue over Calvary, we are meant to feel it all the more strongly in the fantastic nature of that event. The miracles are thus the perfect counterpart of a materialist epistemology, signifying an order of things in which the profane and the divine will no longer coincide.

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<sup>51</sup> In his autobiography, Wallace claims that he wrote his way into religious feeling. Although he did not begin from a strictly religious perspective, he writes, “As this article is in the nature of confessions, here is one which the reader may excuse, and at the same time accept as a fitting conclusion: Long before I was through with my book, I became a believer in God and Christ.” Wallace, *Autobiography* 936.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in McKee 167-168.

Rather than posing what Charles Taylor has so famously called a “subtraction story” here, I want to read *Ben-Hur* as a provocation.<sup>53</sup> It is easy to read the novel as manifesting the problem James ascribes to Balzac the realist:

It comes to us as we go back to him that his spirit had fairly made of itself a cage in which he was to turn round and round, always unwinding his reel, much in the manner of a criminal condemned to hard labor for life. The cage is simply the complicated but dreadfully definite French world that built itself so solidly in and roofed itself so impenetrably over him.<sup>54</sup>

A novel that materializes the greatest problem of a secular age in its form is perhaps nothing more than a historical novel. But the “dreadfully definite” epistemological limitations of this secular world are what *Ben-Hur* attempts to think around by making them visible. Experiencing this world in writing is what allows Wallace to see its limits—an experience he anticipates for his “shrewd” readers. As Christ’s cross disappears into the sky over Cavalry, the last gasp of the miraculous, we are aware of primary challenge facing the believer in a secular age who must go on believing in the absence of any clear sign of divinity. The religious novel in this era must be the sign that will make no sign, a historical novel, like any other. And yet, in its nineteenth-century iterations, the religious novel attempts to slip past the bars of the cage, incarnating an encompassing temporality that would free it from the only order of meaning that now makes a difference.

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<sup>53</sup> See Taylor, *A Secular Age*. For a response to Taylor’s own scholarly provocation, to develop less reductive narratives of secularism, see Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Henry James, “Honoré de Balzac” (1902) in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, and the Prefaces to the New York Edition* (New York: Library of America, 1984) 101.

## Chapter Four: Morality, Slavery, and the Representation of Reality

In refuting the facticity of the *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave, Who Was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama* (1838)—the first slave narrative published by the American Anti-Slavery Society—the editor of the *Alabama Beacon* cites its departures from truth as proof of its status as a romance: “Our citizens know not, they cannot conceive of the powerful influence which these impassionate and horrible romances exercise over the imagination of the women and children of alien communities.”<sup>1</sup> His use of the term “romance” differs from Unitarian clergyman Theodore Parker’s famous claim in “The American Scholar” (1849) that slave narratives embodied American romance: “So we have one series of literary productions that could be written by none but Americans, and only here; I mean the Lives of Fugitive Slaves. [...] All the original romance of Americans is in them, not in the white man’s novel.”<sup>2</sup> How do we reconcile these descriptions of the slave narratives as romances? For the editor of the *Beacon*, romance marks a departure from fact, while for Parker it is a quality of American history that slave narratives depict in a more accurate manner than “the white man’s novel.” Yet what if the slave narrative’s departures from fact expressed a particular attitude toward history? The definitions begin to look analogous.

Defenses of Williams’s narrative—part of what Ann Fabian has termed the larger “public relations disaster” of its publication—reveal the cultural logic that prompted the

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<sup>1</sup> “Narrative of James Williams,” *Philanthropist* 1.26 (1838): 26.

<sup>2</sup> Parker, “The American Scholar,” in *The American Scholar* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1907), 37.

In Lydia Maria Child’s aptly titled, *A Romance of the Republic* (1867), one character sums up the perceived connection between romance and slavery as follows, “I have long been aware that the most romantic stories in the country have grown out of the institution of slavery; but this [the romance of the title] seems stranger than fiction.” Child, *A Romance of the Republic* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 157.

slave narratives' license with fact.<sup>3</sup> Describing the Southern outcry over Williams's story, a writer from the *Emancipator* explains the narrative's sources of truth:

Finding James had mingled some fiction with his facts, they thought that by showing *he* was not a credible witness, they could remove from the minds of northern people all belief that equal and greater enormities were continually perpetrated where slavery exists.<sup>4</sup>

According to this analysis, Williams's *Narrative* represents two types of truth: historical veracity, derived from an aggregate of facts, and moral meaning, which connected facts to a larger universal order of justice and retribution. In characterizing slavery's events as "enormities," the reviewer invokes this second type of truth, condemning these activities as violations of moral law. Yet the outcry over Williams's narrative suggested that the relation of moral and historical meaning was far from settled in the contemporary mind. In slave narratives and their reviews, a nascent historicism clashed with an older providential view of history even while the narratives themselves refigured historical events from a moral perspective. This creative work indicated that the advent of historical thinking did not entail the disappearance of religious epistemologies, but produced accommodations between religious and historical thought that were enacted in the matter of narrative itself.

Attending to the facts of slavery anchored the slave narratives in history, yet they used creative representation to reveal the moral meaning of historical fact, work that is often overlooked in critical definitions of their realism.<sup>5</sup> Additions and literary

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Fabian, "Hannah Crafts, Novelist; or, How a Silent Observer Became a 'Dabster at Invention'," *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondswoman's Narrative*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Hollis Robbins, eds. (New York: Perseus Books, 2004), 44.

<sup>4</sup> "Slavery. From the *Emancipator*. Cruelties of the Slave System," *Christian Reflector* 2.14 (1839): 2.

<sup>5</sup> The political reasons for discussing the slave narratives' realism derive in part from historical circumstance. Realism was a preoccupation for ex-slave narrators due to the prejudiced assumptions that they would deviate from the truth. See William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) and James Olney, "'I was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20 (1984): 46-

expansions in Frederick Douglass's and Josiah Henson's multiple narratives, the insistence on providential occurrence in Douglass's, Henson's and Moses Roper's works, the representation of events not derived from direct observation in James Pennington's and Douglass's multiple memoirs took license with fact, evidencing a concern with history's moral meaning. This moral orientation toward history justified revision and omission, since it was not the facts that counted but the meaning that radiated through them—a truth that Frances E.W. Harper would later characterize as a “divine transcript,” unchanging and external to the events through which it was visible.

During 1850s and 60s, a second generation of fugitive slave narratives extended the representation of moral truth into forms that pushed the boundaries of genre, particularly in narratives written by women.<sup>6</sup> Critics have debated whether works by Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, Hannah Crafts, Julia Collins, and Elizabeth Keckley are romances or novels—genres associated with artistic autonomy—because they depart from older slave narratives' reliance on retrospective narration and biographical details, and they have used these works to argue that anti-slavery discourse fostered a sense of political independence in second-generation narratives. For instance, William L. Andrews defines creativity in these later narratives—what he terms, following Bakhtin, the novelization of the genre—as an expression of political autonomy:

Self-expressiveness presides over retrospective mimesis in the autobiographies of Jacobs and Douglass because of these writers'

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73. Yet even as we recognize this historical imperative, it is also important to recognize where and how writers resisted. Although scholarship on *poesis* in Douglass and Jacobs has followed Andrews' lead in appreciating the creativity of their work, such analysis has not extended to seemingly more didactic figures such as Josiah Henson.

<sup>6</sup> See Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* particularly 270-290; Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 17; and Robert Burns Stepto, “I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives,” *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 225-241.

commitment to the ideal of freedom, not just as the theme of their life quests or as the moral aim of their narratives, but as the distinguishing characteristic of their style of storytelling.<sup>7</sup>

This definition assumes that creativity is an act of self-expression—the assertion of personal autonomy forged from within the strictures of slavery. Yet the creativity that extended from narratives by Douglass, Roper, Pennington, and Henson to works by Jacobs, Keckley, Crafts, and Wilson was not an assertion of self as much as it was an argument against slavery from a moral perspective. Writing as moral visionaries, these authors employed literary experimentation to illuminate the meaning of slavery and racial prejudice. This literary mode differed from self-expressivity as Andrews and others have defined it, which in its celebration of autonomy reproduces the binary that Saidiya Hartman has argued ties slavery to freedom. Freedom presumes its opposite—the condition of being enslaved—meaning that the assertion of personal autonomy in liberal discourse is always tied to the idea of slavery.<sup>8</sup> Yet, when viewed as the expression of a moral orientation, creativity in second-generation slave narratives appears not as an assertion of self but as artistic experimentation driven by a purpose, which accorded individual vision a place within a larger collective effort.

A final development in the slave narrative tradition occurred when a new form—didactic tales about slavery—emerged to replace the slave narrative after the War. Like Wilson and Crafts, authors such as Julia C. Collins depicted the conditions of antebellum society using fictional techniques such as dialogue and third-person narration. Her tale, *The Curse of Caste; or, The Slave Bride* (1865), has been hailed by William Andrews and

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<sup>7</sup> Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story* 280.

<sup>8</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13. Joanna Brooks makes a similar point when discussing black and Native Americans' attitudes about the liberal notions of the "rights of man," since "there was nothing inevitable or natural about the expropriation of 12 million Africans to the Americas and their perpetual enslavement." Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African American and Native American Literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.



Mitch Kachun as the first novel published by an African American woman (against Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s claims for Wilson's *Our Nig* [1859]) because of its break with the slave narrative's first person retrospective narration and reliance on biographical evidence.<sup>9</sup> Yet a consideration of its publication history and moral rhetoric reveals that it is better understood as an evangelical tale, making it a different kind of first: the earliest fictional work in the African American religious press to address the historical problem of slavery.<sup>10</sup>

Although Frances E.W. Harper published works in the same venue as Collins—the *Christian Recorder*, the African Methodist Episcopal Church's nationally distributed newspaper—with a similar purpose of depicting slavery's wrongs using the resources of fiction, her representation of slavery's moral meaning accorded history a newly important role as the place where God's intentions are apparent. Imagining history as an autonomous process that revealed God's intentions in its unfolding, Harper's works departed from previous slave narratives and Collins's tale by envisioning social justice as immanent in time. In Harper's tales and novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892), we see the emergence of a modern form of political representation—racial uplift fiction—from a longstanding religious tradition.

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<sup>9</sup> William L. Andrews and Mitch Kachun, "Editor's Introduction: The Emergence of Julia C. Collins," *The Curse of Caste; or, The Slave Bride*, Julia C. Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), xxxvi. On Henry Louis Gates's claims for *Our Nig*, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., foreword, *Harriet Wilson's New England: Race, Writing, and Region* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007), xii.

<sup>10</sup> On the importance of reading African American literature in discursive contexts beyond the slave narrative see Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 6.

Reading Christianity in the African American canon is often a fraught venture: since masters and slaves shared a creed, Christianity's liberatory potential has often been dismissed. Yet critics from Albert J. Raboteau to Joycelyn Moody have stressed that Christian belief afforded African Americans, free and enslaved, a discourse of meaning and resistance.<sup>11</sup> Christianity's perplexing common appeal to slaveholders and the enslaved derives from competing interpretations of the ultimate meaning of the crucifixion. As Orlando Patterson has explained, a duality in Paul's interpretation of Christ's death and resurrection precipitated two different versions of Christian faith. Pro-slavery exegesis maintained that Paul extended the condition of slavery to a new form of spiritual life: "The sinner, strictly speaking, was not emancipated, but died anew in Christ, who became his new master. Spiritual freedom was divine enslavement."<sup>12</sup> By contrast, African American Christians read Paul as arguing for a new form of life, free from the condition of slavery:

What it meant in symbolic terms was that Jesus did not redeem mankind by making mankind his slave in the manner of the old pagan religions. Rather, he annulled the condition of slavery in which man existed by returning to the original point of enslavement and, on behalf of the sinner about to fall, gave his own life so that the sinner might live and be free. In this interpretation, Jesus' death initiates a new life apart from the binary positions of liberation or enslavement, revealing God's ultimate plan to abolish the states of freedom and bondage and to provide humankind with a new form of autonomy in faith. The creative license that slave narrators and free African American Christians exercised in representing slavery's moral meaning was thus grounded in an idea of liberation derived not from Enlightenment discourses of the rights of man—which presumed the necessity

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<sup>11</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 290; Joycelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001) xi-xii.

<sup>12</sup> Patterson 71

of bondage in civil society on multiple levels—but from an eschatological vision of God’s will.

I will focus on three types of representation that the impulse to manifest God’s will or the moral truth of things in prose inspired in the first generation of fugitive slave narratives: literary expansion, the representation of providential occurrences, and the depiction of events beyond firsthand observation. Frederick Douglass and Josiah Henson expanded their respective life narratives into four different versions, each longer than the last. Douglass’s life was first published as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* by the American Anti-Slavery Society of Boston in 1845; second as *My Bondage and My Freedom* by Miller, Orton, and Mulligan of New York in 1855; and third, as the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1881 by Park Publishing Company of Hartford, a second edition of which was issued in 1892 by De Wolfe and Fiske of Boston. His role in evolving the genre of the slave narrative has been thoroughly documented and his multiple self-iterations determined the slave narrative’s definitive form.<sup>13</sup> Yet critics have explained Douglass’s lives primarily as an exercise in rhetorical self-fashioning, rather than connecting his literary expansions with a moral imperative to represent slavery in its truest light. While Douglass was motivated to publish by a range of factors, the impetus to represent slavery and racial prejudice in the North more accurately was among the most important. Both Douglass’s and Henson’s multiple ventures in published autobiography were informed by the desire to use different forms

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<sup>13</sup> James Olney, “The Founding Fathers—Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington,” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): 1-24; Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); James C. Hall, ed., *Approaches to Teaching the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1999); William L. Andrews, ed., *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991)

and modes of written expression to accurately portray the meaning of slavery and racial prejudice—a moral and rhetorical project.

The differences between Douglass's *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* are evident in their respective openings: while the *Narrative* focuses on Douglass's experiences as an individual, *My Bondage* creates a world into which Douglass inserts himself as an observer. The *Narrative* stresses the primacy of his perspective, using place names to ground the narration in a world whose reality is underwritten by the external verities: "I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland."<sup>14</sup> The phrase links the narrator's existence to the fixity of agreed upon facts, juxtaposing his existential claims, to borrow James Olney's terms, with place names that represent a historicist logic, pointing away from the text to the truth of things in the world.<sup>15</sup> "I was born" depends upon the verities of location, making self-assertion a confirmation of history, conceived as an external set of circumstances and places.

*My Bondage* creates a different effect by constructing a reality in its opening that does not depend upon the external verity of its referents:

In Talbot county, Eastern Shore, Maryland, near Easton, the county town of that county, there is a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever.<sup>16</sup>

While place names structure the beginning of the phrase, they are not essentially linked to Douglass. Instead, he asserts himself in reference to the scene that the phrase constructs,

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 1. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically.

<sup>15</sup> James Olney, "I was Born" 52.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan), 1. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

claiming to know “nothing more” about the country he has already begun to describe than the list of things that follow. In other words, the phrase begins by describing a particular world, and the voice of the “I” is confirmed in reference to the thing it has created. The descriptive terms that follow the assertion of the narrator’s identity indicate that rhetoric will function as a source of truth and identity in *My Bondage*, distinguishing it from the *Narrative*. Truth, this opening suggests, will be the sense of place and pathos created through rhetoric rather than a set of external facts.

Rhetorical expansion allows Douglass to flesh out his characters in *My Bondage*, making key figures more developed and illuminative of meaning. For instance, the description of Edward Covey in the *Narrative* begins with his reputation as a “slave-breaker,” yet it limits further description of his character to his hypocrisy, mentioning that he was “a professor of religion—a pious soul,” which “added weight to his reputation as a ‘nigger-breaker’” (57). General description of Covey’s character ends once Douglass enters his service, replaced by an account of his actions toward Douglass and the other slaves on the plantation. The immediacy of Douglass’s experiences of physical hardship take precedence over descriptions of Covey’s character or person in the narration leading to their confrontation. Although *My Bondage* relates the same sequence of events, it places them in a more expansive context that includes a detailed description of Covey in Douglass’s account of the first beating he sustains:

It did not answer for me to plead ignorance, to Mr. Covey; there was something in his manner that quite forbade that. He was a man to whom a slave seldom felt any disposition to speak. Cold, distant, morose, with a face wearing all the marks of captious pride and malicious sternness, he repelled all advances. (210)

Borrowing quasi-Byronic descriptors from contemporary literature, Douglass broadens Covey’s character, humanizing him while also stressing the allegorical nature of his

character. Full of “captious pride and malicious sternness,” Covey is a representative type of the moral character that slavery produces, much like the character types in contemporary sentimental fiction that reinforced moral principles and universal laws of right behavior by reproducing known categories and patterns. In expanding his description of Covey, Douglass produces a similar effect, enhancing the reader’s sense of Covey’s significance as a moral type of the corruptive force slavery exercised on character.

Expanded description also provided Douglass with the means to reclaim what slavery had destroyed or threatened. Descriptions of his mother change between the *Narrative* and *My Bondage*, eventually producing the relationship he claims that slavery made impossible by establishing intimacy in writing that was circumscribed in life. Introducing his mother in the *Narrative*, Douglass first reflects on the structuring custom of separating child from mother early in life: “For what this separation is done, I know not, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child”(2). His remarks concerning her death seem to confirm this deprivation of familial sentiment: “Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions as I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (3). Although Douglass imagines the capacity of tender and watchful care in the child-parent relationship, his focus in the *Narrative* is naming the corruption of this relation under slavery. He remains essentially without closer ties to his mother other than those he can imagine might have existed.

In *My Bondage*, he expands one of the brief exchanges he had with his mother, generating a relationship between them that produces the grief he claimed to be unable to feel in the *Narrative*. Punished by Aunt Katy, the cook on the Colonel Edward Lloyd's plantation, the young Douglass is crying outside about going without food when his mother appears to champion his cause:

I shall never forget the indescribable expression of her countenance, when I told her that I had had no food since morning; and that Aunt Katy said she 'meant to starve the life out of me.' There was pity in her glance at me, and a fiery indignation at Aunt Katy at the same time; and while she took the corn from me, and gave me a large ginger cake, in its stead she read Aunt Katy a lecture which she never forgot. (56)

Existing as a character for the first time, Douglass's mother embodies the "soothing presence" and "tender and watchful care" that he refers to in the *Narrative* as something he did not have the pleasure of enjoying in life. In *My Bondage*, these qualities are more than a gesture: they are a lived reality in the telling. As a consequence of this narrated incident, Douglass's relationship with his mother becomes the object of the grief he was unable to feel in the *Narrative*: "It has been a life-long, standing grief to me, that I knew so little of my mother; and that I was so early separated from her. The counsels of her love must have been beneficial to me"(57). He goes on to mention her acquirement of literacy and the credit he owes her for his accomplishments, integrating his legacy with her own, which he has created in print. Expansion in print thus affords Douglass the opportunity to supply what slavery has eliminated, and he creates a relationship with his mother in language that he mourns as a reality. In supplying this relationship, language thus exerts a force as a made thing, revealing the moral deprivations of a system that deprives children of relationships with primary parents even while repairing that wrong through narrative elaboration.

Douglass's descriptions afford him a position beyond his own story, an imaginative perspective that broadens the scope of his critique of slavery. In *My Bondage*, for instance, he augments his experiences, still narrated in the first-person, with general accounts of the scene of slavery only possible from a position outside of the events of his own life. In one passage, he typifies the life of the "slave boy," revealing only at the end that this type, derived from the experiences of the many rather than the one, is a figure of his younger self:

He eats no candies, gets no lumps of loaf sugar; always relishes his food; cries but little, for no one cares for his crying; learns to esteem his bruises but slight, because others so esteem them. [...] And such a boy, so far as I can now remember, was the boy whose life in slavery I am now narrating.  
(42)

Critical praise that lauded Douglass as an American type—the self-made man— was responding to the reflexivity of passages such as this, where he abstracts his own experiences and exerts narrative control over a context that sought to deprive him of his humanity. "Such a boy" is the victim of circumstance, but the "I" who remembers rhetorically controls the forces that trouble that boy, leaving little question about who will determine the outcome of the boy's life.

Yet this position of rhetorical distance afforded possibilities for moral critique that are overlooked when the critical focus is Douglass's rhetorical self-construction. In a strange and descriptively effusive segue in the *Life and Times*, Douglass describes the excesses of Colonel Lloyd's table, creating a position for moral critique detached from personal grievance—an objective "view from nowhere" that the description itself makes possible. Detailing the riches of Lloyd's repast, overflowing with the "teeming riches of the Chesapeake Bay," "rich donations of fragrant cheese, golden butter, and delicious cream," and the "fruits of all climes and every description," he concludes:



Here were gathered figs, raisins, almonds, and grapes from Spain, wines and brandies from France, teas of various flavors from China, and rich, aromatic coffee from Java, all conspiring to swell the tide of high life, where pride and indolence lounged in magnificence and satiety.<sup>17</sup>

Such a scene in an autobiography raises various questions about perspective. If this is Douglass's story, why does he devote space to the inanimate objects populating the table and the individuals enjoying the "tide of high life," which do not bear on his own experience and to which he does not seem to be a personal witness? The detailed description is an allegory: the food represents Douglass and other slaves whose lives are consumed in a similar fashion by the luxuriant slaveholders. Yet what matters is the evidence of the allegory, the literal material of Douglass's description. In its rich detail, Douglass's description of Lloyd's table creates the very detail that it simultaneously uses to condemn the excesses of the slave-owner's rapacity. Creative description thus gives Douglass both the material for critique and a position outside of the narration from which he can exercise this perspective, having set before the reader literal proof of slave-owner's moral failings.

In a similar manner, literary expansion offers Josiah Henson a means for substantiating and naming the moral dimensions of his experience. Henson's first narrative, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself*, was published in 1849 by Arthur D. Phelps of Boston and edited by Samuel Atkins Eliot, a musicologist, essayist, and local politician who acted as Henson's amanuensis.<sup>18</sup> Like Douglass's *Narrative*, the *Life* is briefer than later versions of

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<sup>17</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time* (Hartford: Park Publishing Co., 1881), 66. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

<sup>18</sup> On Eliot's role in Henson's work see John Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 78-98.

Henson's story, which would expand his initial observations into rhetorically ambitious accounts of slavery's meaning as well as its facts. In the *Life*, Henson's descriptions are focused on the primacy of first person experience, in the same manner as Douglass's descriptions in the *Narrative*. For instance, in describing his clandestine acts of chivalry for the women on Isaac Riley's plantation, the scene of his childhood and early manhood, Henson claims:

And sometimes, when I have seen them starved, and miserable, and unable to help themselves, I have helped them to some of the comforts which they were denied by him who owned them, and which my companions had not the wit or the daring to procure.<sup>19</sup>

As in the case of Douglass's *Narrative*, Henson's experience focuses the passage, rather than offering a more general description of the women or the scenes of their transactions. Truth here is the truth of experience, yet this scope allows Henson a limited purview for commenting on the meaning of slavery. Riley's cruelty remains implicit in Henson's description of his "denial" of basic necessities to Henson's fellow slaves. Yet the full implications of the system remain beyond the limits of the passage.

In Henson's second narrative, the same incident inspires a rhetorically ambitious treatment that links slavery to a system of moral meaning. *Truth Stranger Than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life*, published by John P. Jewett in 1858, included an introduction by Harriet Beecher Stowe, five years after she had cited Henson as the inspiration for Tom in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Written without the help of an amanuensis, *Truth Stranger Than Fiction* displays a rhetorical control over the narrative's incidents that affords Henson opportunity for commentary on the nature of slavery and its

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<sup>19</sup> Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* (Boston: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849), 9. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

ultimate meaning. In retelling the incident with the slave women, he analogizes slavery to the historical romances popularized by Sir Walter Scott (which also inspired Stowe):

No white knight, rescuing white fair ones from cruel oppression, ever felt the throbbing of a chivalrous heart more intensely than I, a black knight, did, in running down a chicken in an out-of-the-way place to hide till dark, and then carry to some poor overworked black fair one, to whom it was at once food, luxury, and medicine. No Scotch borderer, levying black mail or sweeping off with a drove of cattle, ever felt more assured of the justice of his act than I of mine, in driving a mile or two into the woods a pig or a sheep, and slaughtering it for the good of those whom Riley was starving. I felt good, moral, heroic.<sup>20</sup>

Comparing the experience of slavery to the chivalric romance, Henson exposes the tension that Auerbach has identified in courtly romances between the idea of Christian eschatology and worldly affairs, here represented as the details of Henson's experience.<sup>21</sup> The genre of the romance connects events to a larger system of meaning—an order of good and evil or a social structure of morality and immorality tied to universal conceptions of justice and benevolence. By imagining his experiences as part of a romance, Henson suggests that there is a larger structure determining the events of his life under slavery. Citing Scott also links Henson to Stowe, whose fictional condemnation of slavery was indebted to Scott's employment of the novel in the service of illustrating the high and low points of human morality. With Scott and Stowe as citations, Henson thus located himself within a discourse that used fiction to connect incidents a wider moral frame of reference.

Perhaps the most telling indication of the meaning of literary expansion in Henson's and Douglass's narratives is the role providential events play in their works, revealing the moral and spiritual economies in which their narratives were situated. Both

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<sup>20</sup> Josiah Henson, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1858), 22. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

<sup>21</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 248.

authors describe the meteor shower of 1833 in their second narratives; Douglass ascribes it a providential significance:

I left Baltimore, for St. Michael's in the month of March, 1833. I know the year, because it was the one succeeding the first cholera in Baltimore, and was the year, also, of that strange phenomenon, when the heavens seemed about to part with its starry train. [...] The air seemed filled with bright, descending messengers from the sky. [...] I was not without the suggestion, at the moment, that it might be the harbinger of the coming of the Son of Man. (186)

The second coming at this stage in Douglass's life would be a fitting end to the troubles he suffers under slavery, and though he admits later in *My Bondage* to wondering whether God had intended him to suffer, he concludes that with his freedom "God and right stood vindicated" (337). The meteor shower is a sign of the reality that subtends slavery—a visible reminder of an invisible order of justice that condemns it. By including the meteor shower in his narrative, Douglass aligns his narrative and thus his creative work with an invisible order of truth and order—"God and right."

Published three years after *My Bondage*, *Truth Stranger Than Fiction* repeats much of the language of Douglass's description of the meteor shower, suggesting that Henson may have been citing Douglass directly, and that he was locating his narrative within a similar moral and spiritual economy of representation. Returning to the South after a successful escape in order to aid a friend, Henson reports:

On my way, that strange occurrence happened, called the great meteoric shower. The heavens seemed broken up into streaks of light and falling stars. I reached Lancaster, Ohio, about three o'clock in the morning, and found the village aroused, and the bells ringing, and the people exclaiming, "The day of judgment is come!" I thought it was probably so; but felt that I was in the right business, and walked on through the village, leaving the terrified people behind. (150-151)

The passages share imagery, that of parting heavens and falling lights, as well as a common interpretation of the shower as a sign of the second coming, suggesting that

Henson modeled his description on Douglass's. Like Douglass's interpretation of the event, Henson's description posits God as an active agent in the affairs of history.

Although neither description names the shower as a miracle, both use it to assert a worldview, increasingly under fire during this period, that maintained God's oversight in the affairs of the world.

Compared to Douglass, Henson attributed a greater number of his life's incidents to the direct interposition of God, explaining the association that evolved over time between his work and Stowe's depiction of Tom.<sup>22</sup> While Douglass understood his life as something over which God presided, which remained for him to realize, Henson imagined God as an active agent on his behalf, facilitating his efforts to aid others to freedom. During his second journey on the Underground Railroad, Henson is confounded by the Miami River, since he and his companions have missed the stage that would have taken them to Cincinnati. They are forced to negotiate the river on foot, and while bemoaning the water's depth, Henson and his companions spy a cow:

The cow remained until we had approached her within a rod or two; she then walked into the river, and went straight across without swimming, which caused me to remark, "The Lord sent that cow to show us where to cross the river!" This has always seemed to me to be a very wonderful event. (155)

Unlike Douglass's interpretation of the meteor shower as the sign of a distant God, Henson reads the cow as a sign of divinity's direct involvement in his life. This difference reveals the internal variability of the slave narratives, as well as the fortitude of an explicitly religious and evangelical representational tradition within a literary form

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<sup>22</sup> See Robin Winks, "The Making of a Fugitive Slave Narrative: Josiah Henson and Uncle Tom—A Case History," in *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 112-146.

that dealt with historical events.<sup>23</sup> Henson and Douglass both experimented with using narrative representation to identify the providential supervision of history as well as God's direct intervention in the affairs of those under duress.

Moses Roper also depicted providential influence in his narrative, using the rhetorical device of analogy to draw parallels between his own escape from slavery and Joseph's triumph over similar circumstances. In the *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (1837), Roper escapes from Mr. Gooch, his owner, running to his mother, from whom he has been separated since early childhood. He represents their reunion as the double of Joseph's meeting with his brothers in Egypt:

My own feelings, and the circumstances attending my coming home, have been often brought to mind since, on a perusal of the 42<sup>nd</sup>, 43<sup>rd</sup>, 44<sup>th</sup>, and 45<sup>th</sup> chapters of Genesis. What could picture my feelings so well, as I once more beheld the mother who had brought me into the world, and had nourished me, not with the anticipation of my being torn from her maternal care, when only six years old [...]; I say, what picture so vivid in description of this part of my tale, as the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> verses of the 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis, "And Joseph saw his brethren, and he knew them, but made himself strange unto them. And Joseph knew his brethren, but they knew not him."<sup>24</sup>

By specifying the link between the Bible, his escape, and the reunion with his family, Roper construes the holy text as a prefiguration of his life, a connection that narrative analogy makes possible. In this way, Roper exercises the formal freedom that I have traced through Douglass and Henson's works, in which narrative elaboration—in this case, analogy—makes the moral and theological dimensions of experience apparent.

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<sup>23</sup> I follow George Marsden's definition of evangelical Protestantism, which he identifies using the following criteria: "The essential evangelical beliefs include (1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life." George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, 1838), 20. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

Casting himself as an Old Testament patriarch betrayed by slavery, Roper grounds himself in a teleology of suffering and redemption, using Joseph's trials and eventual victory to predict the eventuality of his own escape and the evolution of his authority as an anti-slavery spokesperson. As Roper exercised it, representational freedom was thus an ability to forge connections between present events and the providential order codified in the Bible.

A final category of narrative representation that I will describe as motivated by moral imperatives includes the depiction of scenes outside of the narrator's direct experience. I have already discussed an instance of such representation in Douglass's account of the scene of Colonel Lloyd's dinner table, and another occurs in his description in the *Narrative* of his grandmother's fate once her owners have "retired" or abandoned her. After quoting from Whittier's poem "The Farewell" (1838), Douglass imagines his grandmother's life, of which he has no firsthand knowledge:

The hearth is desolate. The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and danced and danced in her presence, are gone. She gropes her way, in the darkness of age, for a drink of water. Instead of the voices of her children, she hears by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the hideous owl. All is gloom. The grave is at the door. (49)

Remarkable for its descriptive originality, the passage is also notable for its tense, as projecting his grandmother's current life into narrative form becomes an instance of creation in the present. In other words, Douglass employs the present tense because it expresses the creative act that representing his grandmother must be, since her life is not something to which he has direct access. This interpretation is borne out by the subsequent editions of his life: In both *My Bondage* and the *Life and Times*, the passage is replicated in quotation marks exactly as it appears in the *Narrative*. These marks signify Douglass's self-consciousness about the act of creation that his grandmother's

suffering justifies. Put another way, Douglass was both aware of his rhetorical work and convinced that he was exonerated in employing something like fictional narration to prove a moral point—the injustice of his grandmother’s last days.

James Pennington exerted a similar freedom of representation at the end of *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (1849), depicting a conversation between the brother-in-law of his first protector on his journey North, the Quaker William Wright, and a peddler who aims to turn slave catcher. Imitative of both a play and a catechistic dialogue, the scene begins with the peddler inquiring of several gossips in a local tavern whether they know Wright, a conversation overheard by Wright’s brother-in-law. One local mentions that Wright has a runaway slave living with him, at which point his brother-in-law intervenes, prodding the peddler to reveal that he has been sent by Pennington’s former master to secure the reward for his recapture. Maintaining that Wright does not have any runaway slaves living with him, the brother-in-law is interrupted by the peddler:

PED.-“He may not be there now, but it is because he has sent him off. His master heard of him, and from the description, he is sure it must have been his boy. [...]

BROTHER-IN-LAW.-“I know not where the boy is, but I have no doubt he is worth more to himself than he ever was to his master, high as he fixes the price on him; and I have no doubt thee will do better to pursue thy peddling honestly, than to neglect it for the sake of serving negro-hunters at a venture.”<sup>25</sup>

Rather than recounting the plot of the interaction, Pennington chooses to represent it as an unfolding drama, and the strange logic of this choice becomes apparent at the end of the episode, when he reveals that he was not a witness to the interaction: “One fact which

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<sup>25</sup> James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), 27-8. All subsequent references given parenthetically.



makes this part of the story deeply interesting to my own mind, is, that some years elapsed before it came to my knowledge” (48). Extending his narration beyond firsthand experience, Pennington produces an effect much like that produced by Douglass’s description of his grandmother: the imaginative venture of recreating something beyond witnessed fact gives rise to a representational mode that makes present invention apparent—in this case, dialogue, which progresses in an unpredictable manner that highlights the creative act.<sup>26</sup> Yet the brother-in-law’s speech evinces the moral logic that justifies this inventiveness, chastising the peddler for his willingness to sell a fellow human being into slavery and advising him to ply an honest trade instead. Creativity here is the vehicle of a moral purpose, which is not meant to overshadow Pennington’s rhetorical skill but to grant it an additional value as a worldly tool endowed with universal significance.

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By mid-century, fiction was not only a widely accepted vehicle for religious and moral ideas, it was also the textual medium to which African American writers were turning in greater numbers to develop a perspective wider than that of a single individual on the problems of slavery and racial prejudice.<sup>27</sup> The formal realizations of moral

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<sup>26</sup> For Wolfgang Iser, dialogue is a form that makes the reality of textual invention apparent, in a way that narration, in its seeming completeness, prevents. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 236.

<sup>27</sup> According to Carla Peterson, “Indeed, a primary goal of these black writers [Harriet E. Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, and Martin R. Delany] was the imaginative reconstruction of African-American history and local place. They invented alternative worlds in their fictions that, unlike history and autobiography, permitted projections into the future and the possibility of narrative closure. Unlike the slave narrative, finally, these fictions resisted teleology, offering a discursive space for a larger

authority that I have traced in the slave narratives—literary expansion, the representation of providential occurrences, and the recreation of scenes not derived from firsthand experience—were extended into works that exceeded the generic boundaries of the slave narrative as African American authors, particularly women, sought new ways of articulating not only the facts of slavery but its meaning. By reading the move from the slave narrative to novelistic works such as Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (1854), and Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes; or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868) as evidence of a moral form of creative authority, I am not so much denying the connection between literary experimentation and the growing sense of political agency that critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., William L. Andrews, and Carla Peterson have identified in these works as much as asserting the connection contemporary writers perceived between political freedom and a providential order. These authors wrote freely and broke the boundaries of genre because they wrote to reveal a providential scheme that entailed slavery’s end, an interpretation of history that it was increasingly difficult to doubt as the country approached war.

Although *Our Nig*’s generic indeterminacy has been the subject of extensive critical discussion—with certain critics maintaining that it is a novel, others that it is an autobiography—the meaning of its generic innovation has been generally interpreted as

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meditation on the ‘economics of freedom.’” Carla Peterson, “Capitalism, Black (Under)Development, and the Production of the African-American Novel in the 1850s,” *American Literary History* 4.4 (1992): 563. Barbara Foley also notes that the “Afro-American documentary novel” both employed and challenged contemporary empiricist claims through its fictionality. Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) 234. See also William L. Andrews, “The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative,” *PMLA* 105. 1 (1990): 23-34.

secular.<sup>28</sup> As Carla Peterson has argued, the religious matter of the narrative, a central feature of Frado's life, runs counter to *Our Nig*'s discursive work of asserting Wilson's creativity and exploring the gap between narrating and narrated personae.<sup>29</sup> Yet the narrative's opening reveals that Wilson's novelizing has a moral dimension. Beginning with the chapter heading "Mag Smith, My Mother"—a title that contributes to the ambiguity of a narrative that is otherwise rendered in the third person—*Our Nig* begins:

Lonely Mag Smith! See her as she walks with downcast eyes and heavy heart. It was not always thus. She *had* a loving, trusting heart. Early deprived of parental guardianship, far removed from relatives, she was left to guide her tiny boat over life's surges alone and inexperienced.<sup>30</sup>

Henry Louis Gates has argued that *Our Nig*'s imagination and representation of scenes such as this, which Wilson could not have experienced firsthand, make it a novel.<sup>31</sup> Yet this representation of Mag—who will later abandon Frado with the Bellmont family, at whose hands she will endure years of servitude and abuse—generates sympathy by granting her a complicated past with parallels to Frado's own later history of abandonment by a faithless lover. While imagining Mag's life is an act of artistic virtuosity, taking Wilson outside of her own experiences and into the emotional interiority of another person's life, it is also a moral act: the cultivation of compassion through an attempt to imagine motivations for the abandonment that will determine Frado's future life. Like Douglass in *My Bondage*, Wilson imagines her mother into being, yet she can imagine a deeper life in the third person that Douglass can in the first

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<sup>28</sup> On *Our Nig*'s status as a novel see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Foreward, *Harriet Wilson's New England: Race, Writing, and Region*, eds. JerriAnne Boggis, Eve Allegra Raimon, and Barbara A. White (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007) xii.

<sup>29</sup> Peterson 563, 566.

<sup>30</sup> Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, ed. P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald H. Pitts (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 5. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., foreword, in *Harriet Wilson's New England: Race, Writing, and Region*, eds. JerriAnne Boggis, Eve Allegra Raimon, and Barbara A. White (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007), xii.

by recreating Mag's psychological interiority—an act that, because it explains Mag's crime against Frado, must be read as an artistic choice with a moral valences.

The multiple perspectives of third-person narration also allowed Wilson to develop a sophisticated moral position on racism, which is overlooked when *Our Nig*'s religious content is dismissed. Frado takes increasing interest in religious topics as she grows older, confounding her employer Mrs. Bellmont, who complains that she will “turn pious nigger, and preach to white folks” (49). Baffled by the meaning of repentance and atonement, Frado confronts the question of how she can acquire religious understanding without training or guidance by those responsible for her welfare. Mrs. Bellmont complains about Frado's growing piety to her husband after she catches the girl reading the Bible, opining that if her religious impulses are indulged she will not be as useful for work, to which Mr. Bellmont protests that Frado already does the work of two girls (for twice the abuse):

“I'll beat the money out of her, if I can't get her worth any other way,” retorted Mrs. B sharply. While this scene was passing, Frado was trying to utter the prayer of the publican, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” (50)

The juxtaposition of the scenes is ironic: While Frado is praying to be forgiven, those who truly require forgiveness, the Bellmonts, carry on without any sense of wrongdoing. Although the irony establishes the narrator's authority, as she places Frado and the Bellmonts in their respective moral places, it does not extend to Frado's attempts at prayer. Rather than functioning as an antidote to the girl's religious strivings, the irony and artistic control in the passage—the narrator's ability to sort the world into its moral victors and losers—is implicitly the future result of Frado's inward analysis, the moral doubt that yields insight and compassion.

*The Bondwoman's Narrative* relates artistic effort and moral truth in a similar fashion, suggesting in its preface that the function of its literary work will be evident to readers grounded in a spiritual perspective. The narrator asks herself "How will such a literary venture, coming from a sphere so humble be received?"<sup>32</sup>, acknowledging the literariness that has prompted Henry Louis Gates Jr. to claim the text as the first novel authored by an African American woman.<sup>33</sup> Rhetorically addressing her own query, the narrator defends her production:

Being the truth it makes no pretensions to romance, and relating events as they occurred it has no especial reference to a moral, but to those who regard truth as stranger than fiction it can be no less interesting on the former account, while others of pious and discerning minds can scarcely fail to recognise [*sic*] the hand of Providence in giving to the righteous the reward of their works, and to the wicked the fruit of their doings. (3)

Distancing its work from the definition of romance I have discussed in the introduction—an imaginative product with no connection to fact—the narrator insists that the *Narrative* is more than an invention, yet her justification places her work within the second tradition of romance I outlined at the outset of this chapter—writing that reveals a particular dimension of meaning in history through its inventiveness. This dimension makes the "truth [...] stranger than fiction," and it is what the narrator implies her audience will look for in an account claiming to be true to life. Insisting on both its literariness and unvarnished presentation of history's events, the *Narrative* justifies its creative work by referring readers to the moral meaning its ingenuity serves to highlight. In presenting the

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<sup>32</sup> Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 3. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., preface, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), xi. Other discussions of the narrative's structural analogies to contemporary fiction include Hollis Robbins, "Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*," in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman's Narrative*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Hollis Robbins (New York: Basic Civitas, 2004), 71-86; and Catherine Keyser, "Jane Eyre, Bondwoman: Hannah Crafts's Rethinking of Charlotte Brontë," in Gates and Robbins, 87-105.

only truth that counts—the moral meaning of history—the *Narrative* is thus a work of truth stranger than fiction and equally as literary.

In its opening, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* hews to the conventions of the slave narrative, yet it quickly begins to create literal space within its descriptions for the deviations that would lead its first preserver, manuscript dealer Emily Driscoll, to classify it as a “fictionalized biography.”<sup>34</sup> Beginning with the narrator’s early life on her master’s plantation and her education by Aunt Hetty and Uncle Siah, a kindly northern couple who live nearby, the narrative adheres to a familiar arc that involves the education of its protagonist and challenges associated with this growth. In the middle of the first chapter, however, the focus shifts to preparations for her master’s marriage, instigating a turn in the narration away from conventional representation to imaginative work that marks a break with genre. This turn is figured as a literal opening of rooms: “It was a grand time for me as now I had the opportunity of seeing the house, and ascertaining what a fine old place it was” (14). The narrator begins to invent a landscape and a history:

There is something inexpressibly dreary and solemn in passing through the silent rooms of a large house, especially one whence many generations have passed to the grave. Involuntarily you find yourself thinking of them, and wondering how they looked in life, and how the rooms looked in their possession [...]. (15)

This sequence marks a departure from the traditional slave narrative’s focus on individual experience, although it is not far removed from the expansions that narrators such as Henson and Douglass incorporated into their later works. Yet Douglass and Henson do not enact the pleasures of contemplation and invention in quite the same way as the narrator does here. In this passage, she describes the invention that she is also in the process of bringing into being: “you find yourself thinking of them, and wondering how

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Gates, introduction, xxx.

they looked in life, and how the rooms looked in their possession.” Creative reflexivity and a willingness to follow inventive segues and deviations away from the matter of experience have thus marked the *Narrative* as different from its predecessors—the lives of Douglass, Henson, and others—making it a “fictionalized biography” for Driscoll and a novel for Henry Louis Gates.

The meaning of the narrative’s imaginative work emerges as this scene progresses, however. Among the relics of the house—portraits of past plantation owners—the narrator feels comfortable following the progress of her thoughts: “As their companion I could think and speculate” (17). This companionship confirms her sense of identity as a “rational being, and one destined for something higher and better than this world can afford” (18), meditation that is broken by the housekeeper, Mrs. Bry, who chastises her for thinking that in her “ignorant” state she could hope to gain anything by looking at the pictures. The narrator reflects:

Ignorance, forsooth. Can ignorance quench the immortal mind or prevent its feeling at times the indications of its heavenly origin. Can it destroy that deep abiding appreciation of the beautiful that seems inherent to the human soul? (18)

Meditating on the stately home and its previous residents, the narrator engages in creative, contemplative work that is a derivative of a divine original. In this way, she suggests that the text’s descriptive work is evidence of a connection to a divine original. Rather than affirming creativity as a mark of self-sufficient genius, the passage suggests that it is the sign of a higher moral order.

Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* exercises a similar creative license, producing what Frances Smith Foster has called a “formal hybrid” that combines the tropes of sentimental fiction with

the conventions of non-fictional autobiography to narrate what followed slavery's abolition.<sup>35</sup> As Foster notes, Keckley's life as a slave makes up only a quarter of the text; the remainder is grounded, as William L. Andrews has observed, in her life among middle-class free blacks in the North once she has purchased her own freedom.<sup>36</sup> With her freedom, the narrative changes from a first-person account of past events in the style of a traditional slave narrative to an account of the present rendered in dialogue. Moving to Washington D.C., she obtains a position as a modiste with Mrs. Davis, wife of senator Jefferson Davis, at which point the narrative proceeds by depicting scenes in mimetic rather than recounted time. On Christmas Eve of the year of her service with the Davis family, Keckley recalls:

Wearily the hours dragged on, but there was no rest for my busy fingers. I persevered in my task, notwithstanding my head was aching. Mrs. Davis was busy in the adjoining room, arranging the Christmas tree for the children. I looked at the clock, and the hands pointed to a quarter of twelve. I was arranging the cords on the gown when the Senator came in; he looked somewhat careworn, and his step seemed to be a little nervous.  
(30)

While it is common for slave narrators to describe incidents that transpire on a given day or within a particular period of time (Douglass's confrontation with Covey, for instance), Keckley recreates real time within her narration by pointing to the clock, fostering a sense of the completeness of the scene and its imitative connection to the world.<sup>37</sup> Situating Mrs. Davis offstage with the tree likewise grants this world roundedness, making the authority of Keckley's description a product not of first-person experience,

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<sup>35</sup> Frances Smith Foster, introduction, *Behind the Scenes, by Elizabeth Keckley, Formerly a slave but more recently modiste, and friend to Mrs. Lincoln or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1998), lxxv. All subsequent references to the primary text given parenthetically.

<sup>36</sup> William L. Andrews, introduction, *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), ix.

<sup>37</sup> For more on the creation of literary worlds see Eric Hayot, "On Literary Worlds," *Modern Language Quarterly* 72. (2011):129-161.



but of the completeness of the world she has created. Senator Davis thus enters as a full-fledged character, complete in the way that other aspects of the scene are complete, and possessed of a set of distinctive traits: nervousness, fatigue, and distraction. This depiction resembles Douglass's description of Covey in *My Bondage* in its attention to a character outside of the narrator, yet it is closer to the descriptive segue I have discussed in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, which curtails the slave narrative's first-person perspective to facilitate the description of other characters and imagined scenarios.

Although Keckley positioned her work within a moral frame of reference like Crafts and Wilson, her sense of justification and creative license derived explicitly from history itself, marking a shift from these earlier narratives. Writing after the War, Keckley claims to work from a remove that allows her to portray slavery's "dark" and "bright" aspects, a position possible, as William Andrews has argued, because of "her sense of having been vindicated by history."<sup>38</sup> In describing slavery's end, she claims a divine design, but depicts this pattern or truth as emerging through historical events: "A solemn truth was thrown to the surface, and what is better still, it was recognized as a truth by those who give force to moral laws" (4). The passive tense in this description suggests the tension between the two epistemologies at work in Keckley's thinking: God is both an authoring agent and a distant originator of events that transpire seemingly from immanent causes. She figures her own authorial work similarly, as both active and revelatory:

As one of the victims of slavery I drank of the bitter water; but then, since destiny willed it so, and since I aided in bringing a solemn truth to the surface *as a truth*, perhaps I have no right to complain. Here, as in all things pertaining to life, I can afford to be charitable. (4)

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<sup>38</sup> Andrews, introduction, xvi.

The truth Keckley's writing brings to light is the same truth she claims history has revealed, making her creative ingenuity the partner of historical explanation rather than a challenge to it. Yet if her historicism engenders the creation of fictional worlds—marked by signs of mimetic self-sufficiency such as clocks and off-stage actors—these are not the scenes of historical realism: they do not recreate historical circumstances to reveal, in Lukács' terms, "the peaks and limits of men and epochs."<sup>39</sup> Instead, they reveal history's moral dimension, the "solemn truth" at work behind historical events and personal actions that depended upon historical representation—particularly creative or mimetic writing—to become visible.

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Writing as the Civil War drew to a close, Julia C. Collins shared a similar position with Keckley: both wrote in the midst of a seismic historical change, yet rather than reading history as an order whose immanent logic challenged a divinely ordained plan, both incorporated historical progress into a moral reading of African Americans' fate.<sup>40</sup> Collins's work, in particular, reveals how contemporary writers reformulated an explicitly religious worldview to reflect political and social change, as they began to imagine history as the immanent field in which divine intentions were realized through human effort. Though details of Collins's life remain scanty, we do know that she

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<sup>39</sup> Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, and Gorki, and others*, trans. Edith Bone (London: Hillway Publishing Co., 1950) 6.

<sup>40</sup> Collins began serializing *The Curse of Caste* prior to the cessation of hostilities, and continued writing after the close of the War. Notice of her death is given in the *Christian Recorder* on December 16, 1865. We are thus left to speculate about her intentions for the rest of the narrative, since she left no record of them for posterity.

published the extent of her corpus in the *Christian Recorder*, the newspaper arm of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, a publication that issued moral and didactic writing along with essays on political issues and contemporary historical affairs.<sup>41</sup> Collins's essays evidenced a symbiosis between religious and political discourses by imagining human endeavor in history as a crucial part of realizing divine design. In "Life is Earnest," for instance, an essay published in January of 1865, she advocates human effort in response to the recent turn of historical events:

We have been spared another year, perhaps, to improve the time and talent God has given us, working out his divine will; for it is the will of God that we become a nation and a people; and He is bringing us out of the "depths" to the dazzling heights of liberty, where the very air is resonant with freedom.<sup>42</sup>

Framed as though already underway, the process of liberation that Collins imagines following from the end of the War is both preordained and developed by the "time and talent" of individuals. The essay thus captures a contemporary mood, embodied by the *Recorder*'s amalgamation of political and moral genres, which understood historical change as divinely ordained. As a new epoch began in African American history, Collins and other writers in the *Recorder* interpreted it as a confirmation of previously held ideas about slavery's iniquity and the inevitability of its abolition—a belief I have discussed as motivating the slave narratives' moralism—but also as a call to action in the present.

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<sup>41</sup> Established as a continuation of a previous publication, *The Christian Herald*, the *Recorder* experienced a short-lived start in 1854. In 1861 it came under the editorship of Elisha Weaver who transformed it into a foundational resource for the community as slavery ended and war began. As Frances Smith Foster reminds us: "The Afro-Protestant press rarely if ever confined itself to what we might understand as 'religious' subjects. To the publishers and contributors, as to their intended readers, the sacred and the secular were not discrete elements of their lives and their experiences." Frances Smith Foster, introduction, in *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph* xxvi. For more on the *Recorder*'s national readership see Eric Gardner, "Remembered (Black) Readers: Subscribers to the Christian Recorder, 1864-1865," *American Literary History* 23.2 (2011): 229-259.

<sup>42</sup> "Life is Earnest," in Julia C. Collins, *The Curse of Caste; or, The Slave Bride*, eds. William L. Andrews and Mitch Kachun (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 130. All further references given parenthetically. The essay is originally published in the *Christian Recorder*, vol. 5 (1) January 7, 1865.

Collins's work, like other essays in the *Recorder*, differed from the slave narratives in that it imagined a more active role for human agency in history since history had delivered the changes that ushered in a new era of progress.

Collins also differed from the slave narrators in her self-conscious refusal of memory as a discursive mode, and she stressed active creation as an alternative, making explicit the creativity implied in the slave narratives' expansive dilations. In "Memory and Imagination," an essay published in the *Recorder* in January of 1865, Collins describes the dangers memory poses in "unlocking the ghost-haunted chambers of the brain, and bringing out the skeleton we have hidden, and fain would forget" (131). Instead of allowing memory to run rampant, Collins claims that action and imagination must both be marshaled as tools to monitor the unexpected resurgence of the past in the present:

We must regulate our actions so that in the time to come there may be no dark foreboding scenes to be drawn by memory, that imagination, ever busy, may not even in our dreams, haunt us with accusing visions. (132)

As conscious practices, imagination and action distinguish Collins's narrative practice from the slave narratives and hybrid fictional genres I have discussed. Instead of avoiding the question of whether *poiesis* was implicit in the act of crafting a narrative of memory, a question that James Olney has argued slave narrators were pressured to avoid due to racist assumptions about the nature of "truthfulness," Collins embraced the activity of imaginative creation as part of the imperative of postbellum racial uplift.<sup>43</sup>

Collins's commitment to active creation is evident in the opening of *The Curse of Caste; or, The Slave Bride*, her only fictional work. Opening with a soliloquy, the

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<sup>43</sup> Olney, " 'I Was Born' " 150.

narrative is immediately situated in the present time of invention rather than in the temporality of recollection, marking its difference from previous slave narratives:

“My school-days are over, and now farewell to books and quiet happiness,” said Claire Neville, with a sigh, on the morning following the closing exercises of L— Seminary, as she was gathering books, papers, pens, and drawing materials with sundry other articles pertaining to boarding school life, into an indiscriminate mass, preparing to pack them away. (3)

In a similar fashion to Keckley’s description of Christmas with the Davis family, this opening situates the narrative in a present site of action rather than locating its origins in the past. Dialogue makes the present tense of the narrative development apparent: as in Pennington’s narrative, dialogue’s contingent unfolding evidences the reality of narrative invention in a way that retrospective narration, in its seeming completeness, would prevent. The decision to begin with dialogue thus marks Collins’s narrative as a fictional exploration rather than an autobiographical rendition of the “curse of caste.”

In addition to foregrounding its *poeisis*, the opening of *The Curse of Caste* signals its engagement with a historical problem, the “curse” of its title. Meditating on her future employment as a governess with the Tracys, a Southern family, Claire complains:

“I am weak and foolish, I know,” said Claire aloud, “to feel so badly about leaving old friends and associations, to go forth into a cold and uncharitable world, but I cannot help it. As my very soul shrinks from coming in contact with strangers, who will not understand my nature, and, therefore, cannot sympathize with me.”(3)

Her “nature” is addressed in the lines that follow: “strangely, mildly, darkly beautiful,”

possessed of a “rare, creamy complexion” and a “rich, tropical loveliness,” she is recognizable within a nexus of antebellum racial codes as a mixed race character, indicating that the “curse” of the title is the historical problem of American racism. Thus, despite its commitment to present creation, Collins’s fiction does not turn away from history and in this way it follows the slave narratives, which engaged the historical facts

of slavery and racism from the multiple angles that fictionalized autobiography and autobiography afforded.

Yet the originality of Collins's work is most apparent when it is situated not as a break with the slave narrative tradition in the form of a novel, but as an evangelical tale that introduced a historical problem into a pre-existing tradition of religious writing. In their recovery of the text, William L. Andrews and Mitch Kachun have claimed that it is "quite plainly, a novel," and other critics have followed suit.<sup>44</sup> Yet this reading does not account for the narrative's place in the *Recorder*, which regularly featured essays suspicious of novels and novel reading.<sup>45</sup> Like most religious publications of the day, the *Recorder* favored religious fiction in the form of tales, and the A.M.E. Church regularly advertised tract depository holdings in its pages, including a variety of fictional works such as *Daisy Downs; or What the Sabbath Can Do* (1860); *Sweet Corabelle and Other Authentic Sketches* (1860); *Gerald and His Friend Philip; or Patience to Work, Patience to Wait* (1856). The *Recorder* also published fictional tales in its pages—some original, some republished from other religious journals, and all briefer than *The Curse of Caste*—

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<sup>44</sup> They distinguish *The Curse of Caste* from *Our Nig* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which they define as "autobiographies straining against the limits of genre." Introduction, *The Curse of Caste* xxxvi. Like Frances Smith-Foster, I would like to offer as much information as possible about the discursive setting of Collins's work, not to claim or disclaim the primacy of "firsts," but as a way of responsibly illuminating the text's cultural contexts and impact. Frances Smith-Foster, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Teresa?" *African American Review* 40.4 (2006): 631-645. As Rafia Zafar points out, our concern with "firsts" should not displace the attention we devote to the various rhetorical strategies in works from *Our Nig* to *The Curse of Caste*. Rafia Zafar, "Of Print and Primogeniture, or, The Curse of Firsts," *African American Review* 40.4 (2006): 619-621. I am not interested in displacing claims for Wilson's text with an argument for Collins's work as the first novel by an African American woman. In my reading, neither are novels in the strictest sense of the term, though both employ novelistic techniques.

<sup>45</sup> The *Recorder* is replete with articles that discuss the pitfalls of reading fiction. The writer of an article on "Novel-Reading" concludes, for instance, "Our own judgment is, that the habit of novel-reading is utterly destructive of intellectual discipline, and enfeebling to the last degree." "Novel-Reading," *Christian Recorder*, 10 Aug. 1861.

Further proof of my argument comes from the treatment of Collins's work in the *Recorder* itself. The editor who writes the notice of Collins's death refers to *The Curse of Caste* not as a novel, but as a "story." "Death of Mrs. Julia C. Collins," *The Christian Recorder* (Dec. 16, 1865).

yet none addressed issues of historical identity, racism, or slavery.<sup>46</sup> Reading *The Curse of Caste* in the context of the *Recorder* thus reveals that its generic innovation was the introduction of history to a body of writing traditionally concerned with metaphysical truths and moral principles.

*The Curse of Caste*'s most salient revisions to the traditional tale take the form of explorations of interiority that connect to the historical problem raised in the title. Evangelical tales frequently centered on the inward travails of a central character, and these internal conflicts often occupied much of the narrative focus. *The Curse of Caste* reproduces this structure by presenting Claire's confusion and suffering, yet her duress is caused by a historical mystery—the truth of her parentage by Richard Tracy and Lina, slave to the Tracy family. As the truth gradually comes to light, Claire suffers a collapse, rendered through free indirect discourse and omniscient narration:

The chairs were very neighborly, and were rapidly changing position. The pictures on the wall expressed their approbation of the proceedings by swinging lazily back and forth.

“I must be going crazy,” murmured Claire, tightly pressing her burning brow. Then bursting into a wild, hysterical laugh, she fell heavily to the floor. (84)

Free indirect discourse makes Claire's sufferings immediate, and the reality of her suffering is further confirmed by the return to omniscient narration, which reveals the toll the situation has taken on her health. Unlike a religious tale, the narration does not depict a scene of spiritual suffering but a crisis generated by a specific historical situation—the racism or “caste prejudice” that causes the silence around her birth. Trial and affliction, tropes of the traditional evangelical tale, are thus refashioned in this scene as marks of a particular historical situation, signifying *The Curse of Caste*'s distance from the evangelical tale.

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<sup>46</sup> For more on these tales and their publication in the *Recorder* see chapter two.

Another break with the tale occurs in the narrative's attention to the interiority of characters outside of the protagonist. Colonel Tracy, the family patriarch, reflects in sadness about the events surrounding Richard and Lina's ill-fated relationship. Having shot Richard (without killing him) for marrying Lina, the Colonel is plagued by regret as his estrangement from his son continues in time. The scene of his reflection combines present creation—the formulation of a scene with its own internal logic of time and place—and pedagogy, marrying the formal mechanics of fiction with the traditional tale's moral lesson:

He heeded not the setting sun, as the rays of his glory departed, and were hid behind a bank of gold and purple clouds. He heeded not the rosy twilight, freighted with the chirpings of myriads of insects. And all unheeded, the little stars came trooping forth, and pale Phoebus shed her mellow rays upon all God's creatures. The high and lowly, the happy and miserable, the good and wicked, alike shared her beneficence. Truly the hour of retribution comes to all. (59)

Although the details of this scene are not specific, they do render a world internal to the narrative. Transpiring within this scene in relation to these details, the Colonel's suffering is a narrative event caused by a previous event in the plot. The passage thus preserves the Colonel's autonomy as a fictional character even while it uses his suffering as an occasion for moralizing, suggesting its embrace of fictional technique—the development of characters from conflicts and situations internal to the text—and its adherence to a moral interpretation of a historical problem. It is by uniting creative fiction, moral representation, and historical thinking that *The Curse of Caste* distinguishes itself from prior evangelical tales and slave narratives.

Although Frances E.W. Harper's career differed from Collins's—most notably in the former's active political service and visibility as a public figure in the abolitionist and African American activist communities—she also published her earliest fiction in the



*Recorder*.<sup>47</sup> Although the presence of Harper's work in the newspaper illuminates the political and religious ambitions of the Afro-Protestant press, her fiction evidences another direction of influence—the effect of political and historical concerns on religious and moral writing. Her short stories, in particular, altered the didactic tale completely by introducing historical progress as an explicit subject while maintaining a moral interpretation of historical events. Works such as “Minnie's Sacrifice” and “Trial and Triumph,” along with her later novel *Iola Leroy*, effected a generic shift that distinguished her work from that of her predecessors—Wilson, Collins, Douglass, and Henson—since it made history a text to be read for God's intentions, a move only possible from a postbellum vantage point that would alter the nature of moral writing.

Harper's story, “Minnie's Sacrifice,” published in the *Recorder* in 1869, grapples with the War and its aftermath in a way that distinguishes it even from Keckley's postbellum narrative. Harper focuses on the bonds of black community, returning to the forms of solidarity imagined in Douglass's, Henson's, and Pennington's narratives, while granting these communal bonds a moral and historical significance as signs of a new era—a form of representation only possible on the other side of the War. The protagonists of “Minnie's Sacrifice,” Minnie Le Grange and Louis Le Croix, are both the children of their masters. In order to avoid their being remanded to slavery, concerned members of their families send them north to be educated. Both discover their parentage during the War, and each must choose to join the African American community or to pass

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<sup>47</sup> Harper became involved in the anti-slavery movement in a way that Collins was not. A schoolteacher in Williamsport, PA, Collins's most significant political contribution to the cause of African-American freedom was her writing. Harper, on the other hand, was a writer, teacher, and lecturer: the first black woman to be hired by the Maine Anti-Slavery Society, Harper traveled the country addressing a wide array of audiences, beyond the primarily black Christian audience that she and Collins both addressed in the *Christian Recorder*. Frances Smith Foster points out that at the height of her popularity she sometimes was engaged multiple times per day. Introduction, *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Reader* (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1990) 19.

as white. Known to each other in their previous identities, Minnie and Louis are reunited and bonded by their mutual choice to join the African American community in the fight for freedom. Once Louis has made his decision, the narrative reveals its wisdom in his interactions with fellow African Americans on the road to join the Union forces. Each black person he meets is “faithful,” aiding him in evading the Confederate forces determined to bring him to justice for desertion. One ally offers him the following advice: “ ‘Here,’ said Sam, when Louis was ready to start again, ‘is something to break your fast, and if you goes dis way you musn’t let de white folks know what you’s up to, but you trust dis,’ said he, laying his hand on his own dark skin.”<sup>48</sup> Antebellum slave narratives are not as bold about imagining the link between race and radical solidarity: even Douglass’s conspiratorial escape attempt in the *Narrative* lacks the energy of this quotation, in which the knowledge of the Union’s future victory hovers on the margins as the historical event that will justify Sam’s confidence in black community. The solidarity that Harper projects into the antebellum period was analogous to the communality that she and the editors of the *Recorder* were laboring to establish in the present—a group of committed African Americans who understood their progress as preordained and implied in acts of antebellum collaboration.

The black community in “Minnie’s Sacrifice” is bonded by the idea, analogous to that in Keckley’s preface, that history was unfolding according to God’s intentions, which included the abolition of slavery. Louis ponders this belief as he considers the help he has received from strangers eager to aid a soldier of Lincoln’s army. Wondering what impels them, he reflects:

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<sup>48</sup> Frances E. W. Harper, “Minnie’s Sacrifice,” in *Minnie’s Sacrifice; Sowing and Reaping; Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels*, Frances Smith Foster, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 63. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

Was it not the hope of freedom which they were binding as amulets around their heart? They as a race had lived in a measure upon an idea; it was the hope of a deliverance yet to come. Faith in God had underlain the life of the race, and was it strange if when even some of our politicians did not or could not read the signs of the times aright these people with deeper intuitions understood the war better than they did. (65)

“Reading the signs of the times” is a doubled process: on one hand, the signs refer to the times, making them useful measures for African Americans’ historical awareness. The term also suggests an allegorical reading of history, however, and Harper draws this sense into the first to add a dimension of inevitability to a historical outcome that, from her vantage point on the other side of the conflict, has long since been decided. Yet though it imbues history with allegorical significance, the passage relies for the burden of its proof on historical process—namely, the outcome of the War, which has transpired in real time prior to this retrospective analysis. The passage thus adds a spiritual and moral dimension to what is ultimately an account of history.

In addition to figuring history as an autonomous process with supernatural significance, “Minnie’s Sacrifice” renders it an actor in the present tense of the story’s unfolding. As Louis fights for the Union cause, Minnie writes to encourage him, speculating about the future of the progress they will both contribute to realizing:

She tried to beguile him with the news of the neighborhood, and to inspire him with bright hopes for the future; that future in which they should clasp hands again and find their duty and their pleasure in living for the welfare and happiness of *our* race, as Minnie would often say.

A race upon whose brows God had poured the chrism of a new era—a race newly anointed with freedom.

Oh, how the enthusiasm of her young soul gathered around that work!  
(67)

In this passage, the War is the sign of a divinely ordained order, as well as a changing set of circumstances in the present. Victory seems to fit into Minnie’s reflections as the seamless expression of a preordained moral order—God’s intentions for African

Americans—yet it also changes the future course of events within the passage itself.

Minnie begins the work that she has fantasized about in her letters to Louis because of the turn in the second paragraph, in which the War concludes as both an event and expression of divine intervention. As in Louis's reflections, however, Harper keeps the location of meaning open in this passage: both history and God have separate but related importance as originators of the War's conclusion.

Sustaining this epistemological openness, in which history and God instigate change, Harper urges readers of "Minnie's Sacrifice" to action, like Collins, positing human activity—specifically, human creativity—as the realization of God's purposes for African Americans. In the conclusion to her tale, Harper asks where the genius of the race is tending: "Take even the *Christian Recorder*; where are the graduates from colleges and high school whose pens and brains lend beauty, strength, grace and culture to its pages?" (91) In what may be a reference to *The Curse of Caste*, she goes on to descry the waste of talent in published fantasies of mixed-race marriages, in which women are sacrificed:

While some of the authors of the present day have been weaving their stories about white men marrying beautiful quadroon girls, who, in so doing, were lost to us socially, I conceived of one of that same class to whom I gave a higher, holier destiny; a life of lofty self-sacrifice and beautiful self-consecration, finished at the post of duty, and rounded off with the fiery crown of martyrdom, a circlet which ever changes into a diadem of glory. (91)

The link that Harper imagines between her politics and her faith is evident in this condemnation of what she sees as a morally and socially bankrupt form of creativity.

Writing must serve a dual purpose, addressing the social issues that pertain to the lives of African Americans in history and the implications of these issues for the life to come. As "Minnie's Sacrifice" makes clear, Harper imagines this dual relationship as a particular

interpretation of historical events as immanent and signs of divine design. Harper went further than Collins in making historical events locations of unfolding meaning, yet she also connected these events to a schema determined by God.

Harper's later novel *Iola Leroy* (1891) realizes the labor that "Minnie's Sacrifice" begins to describe before its titular character's death—the work of Reconstruction—which changes the meaning of history from a predetermined order to progress brought about by human effort. This definition of work also alters the status of writing, which becomes a medium for inspiring change rather than an illumination of static truths. In a speech that predated *Iola Leroy* by sixteen years, Harper laid before an audience celebrating the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery's Centennial Anniversary the work that remained to be done in slavery's wake, labor whose moral dimension was chiefly visible in the social changes it brought about:

But if it is glory to destroy, it is happiness to save; and Oh! what a noble work there is before our nation! Where is there a young man who would consent to lead an aimless life when there are such glorious opportunities before him? Before young men is another battle—not a battle of flashing swords and clashing steel—but a moral warfare, a battle against ignorance, poverty, and low social condition.<sup>49</sup>

"Moral warfare" is a battle on social and historical ground: the eradication of ignorance, poverty, and "low social condition" that, while sanctioned by God, relies on the effort of human hands. God is no longer an active agent directing the course of history, as he was in "Minnie's Sacrifice"—ending the War and commencing a new era of freedom for African Americans. Instead, God's purposes for African Americans must be achieved through human effort. The scene of moral warfare is the historical present and its

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<sup>49</sup> "The Great Problem to Be Solved," in *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990) 221.

constitutive matter is the labor of those committed to realizing justice on earth—individuals who understand the business of future building as transpiring on terra firma.

Yet *Iola Leroy* does not disband with a prophetic reading of history—the idea that God guided historical events. Harper repeats the language she used in “Minnie’s Sacrifice” to describe the end of the War as act of divine will: “The lost cause went down in blood and tears, and on the brows of a ransomed people God poured the chrism of a new era, and they stood a race newly anointed with freedom.”<sup>50</sup> In addition to framing the end of the War as a divine intervention, she also presents history as a prophetic document, repeating language about the signs of the times from the earlier tale. Those who fought for slavery could not read the direction in which events were tending:

But slavery had cast such a glamour over the Nation, and so warped the consciences of men, that they failed to read aright the legible transcript of Divine retribution which was written upon the shuddering earth, where the blood of God’s poor children had been as water freely spilled. (12)

As in “Minnie’s Sacrifice,” the passage grants historical process—the end of war—a prophetic significance as the record of divine intention. Yet, as in the earlier tale, this prophetic interpretation is only possible from a retrospective position on the other side of the conflict. In other words, the passage transforms certitude about history into a claim for its religious significance as a record of divine will. If *Iola Leroy* maintains a prophetic reading of historical events, it does so by virtue of its historical position as a postbellum narrative.

The novel’s postbellum epistemological commitments are clear in its depiction of antebellum spirituality—the “old time religion,” according to the younger characters. Iola, the novel’s mixed-race heroine, and her uncle Robert spend much of the narrative in

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<sup>50</sup> Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010) 105. All subsequent references given parenthetically.

dialogue with characters that embody older religious beliefs. Claiming that he does not have much religion, Robert describes his respect for those that do, individuals such as Aunt Kizzy, a “dear, old saint” and “living epistle” (37). Characters such as Aunt Linda, known to Robert during his time under slavery in C—, North Carolina, claim that this type of religion has suffered in the wake of the War, despite the fact that belief no longer needs to be hidden: “ ‘But it don’t seem as ef de people had de same good ‘ligion we had den. ‘Pears like folks is took up wid makin’ money an’ politics’ ” (124). The tension between how the generations view faith is evident in Robert’s conversation with Uncle Daniel, a local preacher, who takes exception to Robert’s suggestion that he study theology now that educational opportunities are available to African Americans: “ ‘Look a yere, boy, I’s e been a preachin’ dese thirty years, an’ you come yere a tellin’ me ‘bout studying yore ologies. I larn’d my ‘ology at de foot ob de cross. You bin dar?’ ” (129) Iola and Robert’s generation lacks the religious experience that defined the previous era; instead, they are shaped by new access to money, political representation, and education. These opportunities afford African Americans the chance to build a new society, but Iola and her peers remain convinced that the example of a previous generations’ faith must function as a corrective to guide new civil initiatives.

More than any other character in the novel, Iola embodies the convictions and moral commitments of a generation committed to uplift—respecting the faith of an older generation while seeing the redemption of the future as a matter of human rather than divine effort. As Uncle Daniel rebuffs Robert’s attempts to encourage his further education Iola intervenes, offering her interpretation of the value of his faith for present generations: “ ‘Dear Uncle Daniel,’ said Iola, ‘the moral aspect of the nation would be

changed if it would learn at the same cross to subordinate the spirit of caste to the spirit of Christ”(129). While Iola clearly supports the “old time” religion, her focus is redirecting this faith into the future life of the nation rather than focusing on the life beyond. In this way, she speaks for the generation coming of age during Reconstruction, who looked for delivery not beyond death, but in the new civil life they were building out of freedom’s expanded social opportunities. Iola thus imagines one way to eradicate slavery’s negative influence, which is, as she explains to her admirer Dr. Gresham: “A fuller comprehension of the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and their application to our national life”(164). As a spokesperson for Harper’s generation, Iola is not an exemplar of the “old-time religion”—the experiential faith that allowed believers to look for redemption either in the life to come or in God’s intervention in the course of history. Instead, Iola maintains that the generation responsible for reconstructing American society must take this older form of faith and apply it in the historical present through the activity of racial uplift: political activity and social initiatives.

Toward the novel’s close, Iola’s cohort—“a select company of earnest men and women deeply interested in the welfare of the race”(187)—meets to debate future trajectories for African American advancement, evolving two different visions of the relation between human effort and divine oversight. The first is evident in a poem by Iola’s friend and future sister-in-law, Miss Delaney. Titled “A Rallying Cry,” (a reprint of the verse Harper published in the *Christian Recorder* in 1891), Miss Delaney’s poem chastises the present generation for their apathy: “Oh, children of the tropics,/ Amid our pain and wrong/Have you no other mission/Than music, dance, and song?” (191) Although the source of “our pain and wrong” remains implicit rather than explicit, the



novel's numerous conversations about racial prejudice leave little doubt about what it might be. Yet the speaker devotes less attention to the origins of the problem than to the actions of those affected by it. Berating the audience for singing, dancing, and dallying "with pleasure's silken thrall," the speaker reminds them of what they ought to be doing: lifting "from the dust" "our long-dishonored name." The poem does not appear to center around a particular historical conflict until the end: "Arrayed in Christly armor/'Gainst error, crime, and sin,/The victory can't be doubtful,/For God is sure to win" (192). While the poem's logic resonates with the novel's account of the War as a record of divine design—an event that God directed in order to "anoint" African Americans with freedom—it also leaves the occasion of God's next intervention vague. What will be the object of God's triumph? In conjunction with the obliviousness of the poem's audience, the ambiguity of occasion for struggle suggests that reading God's will in history was no longer the obvious and viable strategy it had been before the War. As part of Iola's generation, Miss Delaney speaks at a distance from the faith of the past, and while her poem pays homage to an older notion of God's activity in history, it also represents the contemporary scene as fractured, suggesting that a religious reading of history was being supplanted by another outlook.

Another speaker at the conference advances such an outlook. Asked to speak about the condition of African Americans living in the South, the Reverend Carmicle wagers that slavery's effects will only be comprehensible over time:

Time alone will tell whether or not the virus of slavery and injustice has too fully permeated our Southern civilization for a complete recovery. Nations, honey-combed by vice, have fallen beneath the weight of their iniquities. Justice is always uncompromising in its claims and inexorable in its demands. The laws of the universe are never repealed to accommodate our follies. (195)

Carmicle's colleague accuses him of pessimism, to which he replies, "For the evils of society there are no solvents as potent as love and justice, and our greatest need is not more wealth and learning, but a religion replete with life and glowing with love."

Carmicle revises a hermeneutics that looks to history for a record of God's will. Nations, he suggests, put into motion their own vices, "iniquities" that unfold in time and as responses to particular social circumstances. Yet "love and justice" emanating from each citizen can correct the problem, making history and human action the setting and medium for recovery. Human "follies" are still measured in Carmicle's view by the "laws of the universe," an external standard similar to divine justice, but the social vices that he describes are, like their remedy, immanent in human society and human action.

Carmicle does not neglect religion and like Iola he claims that "a religion replete with life and glowing with love" will repair the damage done by slavery. Yet this religion belongs to a generation removed from seeing God as a direct influence in history—a generation committed to change in the present rather than rewards in the hereafter. Carmicle thus speaks as a product of his time when he claims religion's centrality while also maintaining a historical view of human progress and social reform.

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Harper's work effected change and instigated a template for future uplift fiction, yet it also indexed currents in postbellum religious and moral thinking. The country would never recover the antebellum confidence that God could intervene in history at any time. Instead, new fictional imaginings of the proximity between invisible and visible realms rose to fill the breach that the War had opened. From imagining Christ in the

contemporary South or Chicago to painstaking historical recreations of the scene of Jesus' life and death, postbellum religious writing would continue to imagine history as an immanent order with its own internal logic, overseen by God. Yet the distance between the visible and invisible did not result in the irrelevance of the latter. Instead, religious epistemologies imbued history with a meaning that was distinguishable from other historical theories. If Christ came to Chicago, history would change as individuals found new ways of relating to one another. In the same way, Iola imagines Christ as an influence that changes the course of human progress in the present.

The move from antebellum to postbellum understandings of history, divinity, and the relation between them is best characterized as a transition from literal to figurative conceptualizations of influence. Figuration has traditionally suffered as a less substantial mode of truth telling than literal fact. And yet, figuration does real work in revealing truths that might otherwise remain unseen. If we appreciate slave narratives and didactic tales about slavery for their creativity, then we must also acknowledge the real influence that figurative understandings of time and divine influence played in the lives of postbellum Americans.

## Conclusion

Writing with an idea in mind became a rallying point for realism. Everything depended on subject as Henry James pointed out in “The Art of Fiction”(1884). For the realist, the subject or type was essential: “Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive.”<sup>1</sup> Yet type as James conceives it is not what it was for Stowe—an idea drawn from observable experience and imbued with moral and even sacred significance. For James, the type is drawn wholly from the world.

This is not to say that he discredited morality in writing. Responding in “The Art of Fiction” to English novelist and critic Walter Besant’s 1884 pamphlet of the same name, James agreed that a conscious moral purpose was crucial to fiction, though he claimed to be at a loss to understand Besant’s use of the term. For Besant, moral purpose derived from a particular type of narrative content:

It is, fortunately, not possible in this country for any man to defile and defame humanity and still be called an artist; the development of modern sympathy, the growing reverence for the individual, the ever-widening love of things beautiful and the appreciation of lives made beautiful by devotion and self-denial, the sense of personal responsibility among the English-speaking races, the deep-seated religion of our people, even in a time of doubt, are all forces that act strongly upon the artist, as well as upon his readers, and lend to his work, whether he will or not, a moral purpose so clearly marked that it has become practically a law of English fiction.<sup>2</sup>

By representing the individual’s capacity for sympathy, devotion, and self-denial, English fiction achieves a moral end through its subject matter, or so Besant implies. Morality in this sense differs from the biblical admonitions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) or *Robert Dawson* (1846), yet it is not far from social virtue as it functions in Frances Jacson’s *Rhoda* (1816) or Frances E.W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892). In other words, Besant

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888), 398.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1902), 57-8.

contends that subjects drawn from history can reinforce moral principles, making fiction unique among the arts as a pedagogical vehicle.<sup>3</sup>

Besant's definition of fiction's moral value would have been familiar to American readers accustomed to works with moral and religious ambitions, yet James's definition of morality breaks from this tradition by emphasizing style over content. Rather than finding morality in subject matter he claims:

There is one point at which the moral sense at the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth.<sup>4</sup>

This quality of mind is embodied in the process of taking the ell from the inch in writing, following the implication of things in order to grasp the unseen from the seen. Only the power of observation will yield an accurate rendering of things as they are, and it is this rendering that is beautiful and true. James thus upends the legacy of beauty and truth in the history of aesthetics to insist that what is beautiful and true is that which reflects experience most accurately and proceeds from the most expanded view of the world. Morality is not a function of how thoroughly a work reminds the reader of a principle—self-denial or devotion—but is instead a function of style or how thoroughly a representation reflects the widest purview of observation and extrapolation. In the preface to the New York Edition of *The Golden Bowl* (1904) he calls this mode of representation a “religion of doing.”<sup>5</sup>

William Dean Howells similarly proposed a muscular form of representation—a language that sets forth objects with the definitiveness of facts—as an antidote to

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<sup>3</sup> “It is the most moral, because the world has always been taught whatever little morality it possesses by way of story, fable, apologue, parable, and allegory.” Besant, 17.

<sup>4</sup> James, 406.

<sup>5</sup> Henry James, preface, *The Golden Bowl*, vol. I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), xxiv.

traditional fictional idealization. The comparison between the real and the typical or ideal grasshopper in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891) excoriates the latter for obscuring “simple, natural, and honest” subjects, yet the solution rests not only in the subject—the elevation of the real over the ideal—but in its treatment in language, which creates scenes and characters as solid as the facts it represents. Howells cites Grant’s *Personal Memoirs* (1885-6) as an example of how such language works:

The author’s one end and aim is to get the facts out in words. He does not cast about for phrases, but takes the word, whatever it is, that will best give his meaning, as if it were a man or a force of men for the accomplishment of a feat of arms. There is not a moment wasted in preening and prettifying, after the fashion of literary men; there is no thought of style, and so the style is as good as it is in the Book of Chronicles, as it is in the Pilgrim’s Progress, with a peculiar, almost plebian, plainness at times.<sup>6</sup>

Though he differs from James in his definition of style, his emphasis on language that provides a view of the world through its solidity resembles James’s insistence that as a picture is a reality, so too is the novel history.<sup>7</sup> Yet Howells returns this concrete language to a religious precedent—language concerned not with style but with truth. Thus even in condemning the religious and moral impulse in nineteenth-century fiction, Howells returns to Puritan poetics for a counterexample. So too does James, by way of a genetics of relation. A “religion of doing,” of making truth take on form in language, depends on the belief that language possesses the capacity to reveal truth. This is the starting point of a Puritan poetics, yet it perseveres as an idea in late-nineteenth-century realism even after truth has become purely historical.

Of course, the change in the subject of truth makes all the difference. I have followed how that shift occurred within nineteenth-century American fiction as a move

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<sup>6</sup> William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1981), 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> James, 379.

from imagining beyond history to seeing it as a final and self-sufficient explanation. For James, the novel requires the freedom that comes from a historical and rational subject position:

A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say.<sup>8</sup>

Freedom in the sense he means it here is thus the freedom of the modern, rational, and historically oriented author. What then should we call representational freedom in fiction that adhered to fixed moral or biblical ideas—the ability to express what was known in a new way so as to make it relevant in a given set of historical circumstances? The American Sunday School Union and the American Tract Society produced instructive tracts and Stowe and Warner instructive novels by way of such an idea of linguistic freedom, in which language was free precisely to the extent that it was bound to a set of predetermined ideals.

This bound freedom or confidence that language could evolve something new while staying true to facts from which it could not depart was not far off from its counterpart in realism, which was tied to a standard of historical fidelity that was no less strict than adherence to scripture or moral law. In both cases a belief prevailed that language did something and that its formal work was related to and justified by an external standard of meaning. Perhaps the difference rested entirely in form, the matter in which realists, moralists, and spiritual visionaries had so much faith. In this sense, early American fiction can be understood as a field in which confidence in the truth-value of language—truth that was religious, moral, or historical in nature—produced different results. These differences tell us something about fiction's structure, which could support

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<sup>8</sup> James, 384.

a diverse range of possibilities from the premise of being like history but not identical to it.

This may be a romantic view of language and narrative form—a replication of the confidence in language I propose simply to document. Perhaps my discussion confirms what Charles Taylor and Hayden White have proposed: that language offers something in the wake of a recedence of a religious worldview that compensates for a felt loss of meaning.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps. At the outset I claimed that the project was about modern fiction—two terms that define one another. All fiction is modern in some sense, taking its cue from history, and modern subjectivity finds an especially apt representation in fiction. Yet early fiction suggests that the modern subject's engagement with history was multifold, leaving space to consider the engagements with which we work today.

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<sup>9</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) Section V and Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987): 1-25.



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