FAITHFUL READINGS:
RELIGION, HERMENEUTICS, AND THE HABITS OF CRITICISM
1880-1950

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A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE BY
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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April 2019
Abstract

*Faithful Readings* outlines a revisionist history of the discourse and practice of Anglo-American literary criticism between 1880 and 1950. This dissertation contests the secularization narratives that structure many received histories of the discipline, narratives in which habits of critical interpretation and reflection inevitably supersede or simply survive a credulous, pre-modern religion that had become increasingly untenable through the nineteenth century. The project presents a genealogy of this enduring concept of religion as naïve and literal belief, arguing that the concept was produced as a polemical strategy in a theological contest: it was first promoted not by disinterested secular critics but by the under-remarked nineteenth-century theological movement known as Protestant modernism as a dismissive depiction of its theological rivals. For modernists, faith was a self-consciously interpretive relation to the Christian tradition as a complex of historically and culturally mediated forms whose ultimate object was an ineffable, infinite reality: defined against propositional belief, true religion was a way of reading this tradition critically. This dissertation argues that the habits of literary criticism developed in this period were recursively entangled with the powerful and problematic hermeneutics that defined this one contemporary Protestant theology. In chapters dedicated to the reading practices of such formative figures as Matthew Arnold, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and T.S. Eliot, the project elucidates the political, epistemological, and institutional pressures that led both biblical and literary critics to develop new methods to legitimize their work as specialized, modern disciplines and also to remain faithful to their cherished texts as authorities that exceeded the knowledge such specialized methods could produce. Thinking beyond the purported opposition between the critical and the religious, the project defamiliarizes tensions within enduring habits of literary criticism and invites serious reflection on the forms of discipline that may be required should critics decide to change their habits.
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Acknowledgments

I am grateful first and foremost to my advisers Diana Fuss, Joshua Kotin, and Sarah Rivett: their support and encouragement gave me the courage to follow this inquiry where it has led, and their generous readings have guided my thinking in ways I cannot fully name. They trusted me when I did not trust myself; they believed in this work when I did not. I am grateful too for other mentors and models of generosity and integrity among the Princeton faculty: Jeff Dolven, William Gleason, Eric Gregory, and D. Vance Smith.

This project began to take shape in the 2015-6 Religion and Culture Workshop, and I am so grateful to the Center for the Study of Religion for the fellowship that brought me into that community. This work has also benefitted tremendously from questions and responses from my Princeton colleagues in the Long Nineteenth Century Colloquium, to whom I presented an early draft of the introduction, and those in the Twentieth Century Colloquium, to whom I presented a version of the last chapter on Eliot. Portions of the first chapter were presented at the Princeton / Rutgers Victorian Graduate Conference on 10 February 2017 under the title “Matthew Arnold and the Natural Death of Biblical Literalism;” an early section of the second chapter was presented at the Sacred Literature, Secular Religion Conference, 1-3 October 2015 under the title “Modernists Against Modernity: The Fundamentalism of the American New Critics.”

This dissertation has been nourished by countless conversations with colleagues and friends: it owes its existence to these sustaining relationships and communities. Orlando Reade and Matt Rickard have shown solidarity in moments of frustration and discovery: our writing group has been life-giving; together we have framed and reframed the questions that animate this dissertation. Many others have guided and shaped this project in large and small ways. In particular I want to thank Ian Davis, Yanie Fecu, Liz John, Nick Lutsko, Jessica Mack, Jen Minnen, Brendan Pietsch, Megan and Ryan Sarno, Matthew Spellberg, and Kate Thorpe. For the challenge to think more clearly about the questions that matter most, I am grateful to my students at Princeton and those incarcerated in New Jersey State Prisons. To the communities at All Saints’ Park Slope and the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary, I give my most humble thanks; I raise a glass to John and Jan Logan for their hospitality, their fellowship, and their good humor: I love you both.

Finally I want to thank those friends and family who have supported me and this project in innumerable ways, and for whom the success of this work is finally irrelevant: Andrea and Claude Adair, Ellie Adair and Ben Dixon, Shirley Adair, Marion Anderson, Scott and Virginia Cramer, Skitch Matson, Matt Morello, Patrick O’Brien, Marian Sabal, Leah Silvieux, William Stell, Jonathan Tarleton, and Jon Wasson. For a love that has changed me and keeps changing me, I thank Meg Cramer: I dedicate this work to her.
Introduction

This dissertation has been nurtured in a university English department, and it addresses an audience situated within the academic discipline of literary studies. It offers a history of reading practices that have profoundly shaped the discipline and which still inform contemporary scholarly and critical interpretation: Matthew Arnold’s critical ideal of “seeing the object as in itself it really is,” the practice of close reading as it was articulated by John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks, and T.S. Eliot’s sensibility for texts and readers as part of a holistic and yet dynamic tradition.

This project thus focuses on reading practices developed between roughly 1880 and 1950. It builds on histories of the discipline that describe this period as a struggle over the role that literary study would play in a changing modern world and the place it would carve out for itself within the new disciplinary architecture of the modern research university. This dissertation frames that struggle as a contest between competing forms of faithful reading: a contest between readers who sought to be faithful to new methods of knowledge-production that would authorize literary study as a specialized, modern discipline and readers who sought to remain faithful to an idea of literature as a form of human life whose power and value transcended and resisted the reductive explanations such skeptical and specialized methods could provide.¹ This dissertation focuses on figures whose habits of criticism were shaped by their attempts to be faithful to both.

¹ “By the end of the nineteenth century, literature came to be identified with the nonliteral or figurative aspect of language, and with the fictional speech act. Literature became the repository of whatever in language was resistant to scientific rationality; on this basis it was given the further task of signifying a resistance to science itself, to modern civilization.” John Guillory, “Literary Study and the Disciplines” in Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle, eds. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2002), 16-43; 35-6. This account draws primarily on the authoritative history of the discipline in this period, Gerald Graff, Professing Literature: An Institutional History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Graff memorably described the debates over methodology in the
This project illuminates the power and the problems of these interpretive habits by reading them as recursively entangled with the interpretive modes that a movement of modern theologians and biblical critics developed in the nineteenth century to carve out an analogous place of legitimacy and protection for faith itself—religious faith. This movement was Protestant modernism. Aligning themselves with emerging modern disciplines of knowledge-production, Protestant modernists turned those disciplinary methods toward the reinterpretation of Christianity itself as a historical and human institution. The Bible and the whole of Christian doctrine and tradition that was based upon it were not to be believed, but to be read, and read critically: for these Protestant modernists, the practice of true religion was to cultivate a self-consciously interpretive relation to one’s whole faith tradition as a complex of historically and culturally mediated forms. These forms had originally expressed something of religion’s essence: a nonrational, ineffable intuition of “the infinite,” a relation to an organic, holistic reality that

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2 Protestant modernism has most often been discussed by church historians as a sub-movement of late nineteenth and early twentieth century liberal Protestantism: more focused accounts have been infrequent. This project draws primarily on the approach taken by Kathryn Lofton in “The Methodology of the Modernists: Process in American Protestantism,” *Church History* 75.2 (June 2006), 374-402. Lofton argues that modernism was defined by a methodological program: “Again and again within modernist literature, the process of believing is emphasized over and above the definitive dogma. How you believe, for the modernists, was your belief.” (378). She quotes Cyril W. Emmett, who wrote in 1922 that “[t]he essence of modernism lies not in its conclusions,” wrote one proponent in 1922, “but in the way they are reached and the temper in which they are held.” Cyril W. Emmett, “The Modernist Movement in the Church of England,” *Journal of Religion* 2 (November 1922), 562. This complicates the previously definitive account offered in 1976 by William Hutchison, precisely because Hutchison organized his account around a set of beliefs: for Hutchison, the modernists believed in adapting religion to culture, like other liberal Protestants, but they were set apart by two additional articles of faith: that God was immanent in cultural development and revealed in it, and that human society was moving steadily toward the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth (otherwise known as post-millennial progressivism). *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). For broader accounts of the contest in that period between liberal Protestants who were willing and even eager to accommodate Christianity to modern culture and those conservatives who fervently resisted what they saw as the loss of a scriptural cosmology, Christianity’s retreat from its normative dominance in Euro-American politics and culture, and the diffusion of Christian belief into vague agnosticism, see Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), esp. ch. 13 and 14.
they posited beyond language and concept. They thus put their faith in modern methods of philological and historical inquiry to reveal the meaning of the biblical texts for their original audiences, and thus bring them closer to the infinite reality that exceeded and supervened every propositional statement—be it scientific or dogmatic. Crucially, Protestant modernists elaborated this new concept of religion in polemical opposition to contemporary theologies that were invested in the propositional truth of the Christian tradition: they relentlessly attacked their theological rivals as credulously naïve biblical literalists whose belief in the factual accuracy of Christian doctrine was an embarrassment to modern sensibilities.

This dissertation thus aims to historicize the concept of religion as naïve dogmatism that histories of the literary studies have often found “good to think with”—as that which the study of literature supersedes or survives. It argues that this concept of religion—which remains a paradigm of uncritical reading that informs our present conception of literary studies as a modern and critical (and thus secular) discipline—was the product of a nineteenth-century theological polemic. This dissertation makes no attempt to defend the doctrinal claims made by Christianity or any other faith tradition. Nor does it argue that doctrine is not what religion is “really” about: this project does not propose an alternative concept of religion as a normative

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3 Talal Asad has argued persuasively that such narratives are more usefully understood as apologetic explanations for particular constructions of the secular rather than as meaningful accounts of what religion is or has been historically. Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003). Here I draw on Claude Lévi-Strauss’ famous remark about the symbolic importance of animals which are “chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think.’” Totemism, trans. Rodney Needham (London: Merlin Press, 1964), 89.

replacement. Rather the project argues for a disciplinary history of literary criticism in this period that emphasizes not its opposition to religion as naïve belief but rather its entanglement with the reading practices developed by one particular theological movement that elaborated and deployed this polemical concept for its own apologetic ends: Protestant modernism.

This project thus argues that religion is still good for scholars and critics of literature to think with, on the condition that we think with religion as a concept that is the subject of ongoing historical, theological, and political contest, and attend to the stakes of that contest for those who have the power to shape it and for those who must submit to it or subvert it. Through the chapters that follow, this project defamiliarizes some of the tensions that inhere in past and present literary critical reading practices by illuminating the apologetic function of similar hermeneutics in the adaptive praxes of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Protestants. Tracing a parallel genealogy between these novel forms of religious reading and contemporary literary critical methods, it demonstrates how the changing status of scripture can serve as a foil for historical changes in the concept of the literary object—the text—to which a reading was faithful as communities of readers in the period ambivalently sought legitimacy in new institutional cultures. Finally, thinking with the power and the problems of the hermeneutics developed by religious readers in this period opens new avenues for literary critics and scholars

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5 I follow Asad, for whom there is “nothing essentially religious, nor any universal essence that defines 'sacred language' or 'sacred experience.'” Likewise “the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity: “it works through a series of particular oppositions” to that which it deems “religious.” *Formations of the Secular*, 25.

6 The discourse of what religion “is” is like any other: it develops and transforms in the ongoing contest over the power to produce and authorize what is acknowledged as truth. As Foucault has written, the real question is not how to persuade people to change their thinking about a concept; the question centers on control of “the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth.” Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 51-75; 74. Again following Talal Asad, this project assumes that the discourse of religion that is relevant to its inquiry was produced within a hegemonic and imperial Christianity and that the inward-facing polemics and outward-facing apologetics of Christian history have dominated the discourse of what religion is and is not. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 41.
to examine our persistent presuppositions about the power of reading critically to effect personal and political transformation: it invites us to think beyond the dichotomies between critical and uncritical or religious and secular readings to ask about the forms of discipline that may be required should we decide to change our most basic habits of interpretation.

i.

Historians of the discipline of literary studies have invoked two broad narratives of secularization to frame the development of Anglo-American literary studies between 1880 and 1950. First, there is the etiological myth in which literary studies supersedes religion as the torch-bearer of universal values and timeless spiritual truths. Its commonplace is Matthew Arnold’s 1880 remark that “most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.” As science progressively undermined the authority of hitherto unquestioned human traditions—especially Christian doctrine—the study of literature would keep alive those truths that were irreducible to empirical analysis and quantitative evaluation.

The study of literature would displace “a religion that had become too dogmatic,” as one scholar

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8 This narrative might be thought of as the discipline-specific version of what Linell Cady has called the “essentially supercessionary narrative of secularization” that anticipates the “increasing displacement of religion by secular discourses, identities, and institutions,” resulting in the emancipation of all social spheres from the oppressive “yoke of religion.” “Secularism, Secularizing, Secularization: Reflections on Stout’s Democracy and Tradition,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75.3 (Sept. 2005): 871-885; 874. For the most capacious critique of the “subtraction narrative” of secularization, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 2007).

has put it, thereby taking “the cultural function of transmitting moral and spiritual values to at least a select segment of society.”

Second, there is the narrative in which literary study itself undergoes a process of secularization consequent to its professionalization. As Gerald Graff tells this story, in the nineteenth century college, professors were often also Protestant ministers: they taught literature as a vehicle for moral formation and as part of a curriculum that wove together all knowledge into a Christian framework. As institutions of higher education increasingly adopted the disciplinary specialization that characterized the research university and its ethos of methodological naturalism, the holistic moral philosophy that rested on the Christian claim to universal truth began to unravel. The pastoral pedagogue gave way to the “secularized educational professional” in pursuit of “the advancement of knowledge wherever it might lead.”

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10 Michael Kaufmann, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession” New Literary History 38.4 (Autumn 2007): 607-28; 616. Kaufmann calls this the “Arnoldian replacement narrative,” noting that it has become “so entrenched in the narrative of the profession that it now functions more as a rhetorical gesture than a deliberative argument.”


12 Graff, Professing Literature, 59-60. Jon Roberts offers a cogent account of the gradual and largely implicit shift of scientific inquiry in the nineteenth century away from the common presumption “that religious meaning and significance infused all of reality” to the premise that scientific analysis should exclude recourse to the supernatural. “In effect, the very idea of what counted as an ‘explanation’ changed….The appropriate response to the inability to account for natural phenomena naturalistically was to solicit further scientific inquiry, not posit the supernatural. Increasingly after 1870, scientists preferred confessions of ignorance to invocations of supernaturalism.” The Sacred and the Secular University, 27; 29. For the phrase “methodological naturalism,” see 28-30 and 129. Marsden calls this same phenomenon “methodological secularization.” The Soul of the American University, 156.

13 Graff, 59-60. It is interesting to note that Graff elsewhere also includes his own version of the replacement narrative, noting that late nineteenth century professors of literature “channeled into literature emotions that, a half-century earlier, would have likely been expressed in evangelical Christianity, Unitarianism, or Transcendentalism, investing the experience of literature with the redemptive influence their ministerial ancestors had attributed to the conversion experience” (85). In this passage Graff is discussing those professors he calls the “generalists,” who, unlike the “investigators”
specialized methods and privileged objects of inquiry; it became a discipline in a larger institutional structure of knowledge production that approached all texts—including sacred texts—as historical artifacts whose content was to be understood in relation to their historical and cultural context.¹⁴

Both of these secularization narratives depend upon a concept of religion as a system of propositional beliefs and creedal statements about a supernatural reality. This concept was produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Protestant theologians who were concerned with particular apologetic problems and polemical contests.¹⁵ This Enlightenment discourse of religion has been massively influential: it helped to frame the burgeoning discipline of comparative religions, and it is still very much a force in the contemporary academic discussion of what religion “is,” and in the popular feeling about what it is to be religious—that

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¹⁴ As Roberts and Turner note, such “philological historicism” was compatible with the specialized disciplinary studies that were being institutionalized within the university, although they had “an independent and different taproot in the scientific realm.” The Sacred and Secular University, 13. It is also important to note that the study of Christian theology did not disappear; it was simply relegated to its own specialized niche in a professional school for “Divinity” studies.

¹⁵ Since the 16th century, whatever “religion” names has been always been applied first to the task of understanding others. As Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, “religion” first comes to name something like the conceptual category it currently covers as a conceptual tool to negotiate the encounter of Christian colonizers with the indigenous peoples of what would be called the Americas: religion, as such, “is not a native category. It is not a first person term of self-characterization. It is a category imposed from the outside.” “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Critical Terms for Religious Studies, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 269-84; 269. Gil Anidjar has offered the most capacious version of this claim that I am aware of, arguing that Christianity creates religion as a category of analysis, establishing the terms from which it itself retreats, becoming the neutral ground of the “secular” upon which all other religions appear as difference. “Secularism,” Critical Inquiry 33.1 (Autumn 2006): 52-77.
is, a “believer.” It is worth understanding the conditions under which belief came to be so emphasized and the problems it solved before accounting for the problems it would cause.

The concept of religion as grounded in propositional truth-claims and an inward disposition of private piety arose in the eighteenth century in response to pressures from within Christianity and without. On the one hand, the increasingly inner locus of religiosity was an outgrowth of theological debate: this shift came from “within” Christianity. The Reformers were hostile to sacramental “hocus pocus,” as they were to the Catholic doctrine of implicit belief in which one could accept the doctrines of the Church without understanding them. As Calvin wrote, “Is it faith to understand nothing, and to submit your convictions implicitly to the Church? Faith consists not in ignorance, but in knowledge.” Accordingly, they put pressure on the new confessions to make their beliefs explicit and understood. Reflecting the theology of these new Protestant practitioners and their internal debates, “religion” increasingly came to signify the holding of a certain set of propositions about God and the universe to be true, and the internal will to worship and adore God that flowed from those beliefs.

On the other hand, these changes in the definition of “religion” reflected pressure from “without:” the term was being shaped as an object for new techniques of investigation and explication that were being developed with the rise of natural science. As Peter Harrison has

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16 “For many people today,” one scholar and theorist remarks, “having faith comes merely or centrally to mean stubbornly believing certain unfounded, often bizarre propositions.” William Lad Sessions, The Concept of Faith: A Philosophical Investigation (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 5. For a recent critique of a Protestant obsession with the adequacy of propositional representation in contemporary religious studies, and an attempt to recuperate a Catholic discourse of presence in order to open up the kinds of questions scholars and theorists are willing and able to ask, see Robert Orsi, History and Presence (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).


18 Smith notes that in Germany this corresponded to the increasing use of Glaube (“faith”) over “Religion” (271).
argued, “religion” in the 17th century was constructed as a rational object, “for it was created in the image of the prevailing rationalist methods of investigation: ‘religion’ was cut to fit the new and much-vaunted scientific method.”\(^1\) As Protestant theologians and Deist philosophers developed this discourse, a generic category of religion began to emerge: Lord Herbert of Cherbury, for example, contended that beneath all positive, historical traditions there was one true religion defined by five “common notions,” and furthermore that these notions together comprised saving knowledge.\(^2\) This rationalism also informed the apologetic strategy of those who held to the orthodox traditions: religious beliefs were to be sustained by rational demonstration. Hugo Grotius thus attempted to defend Christianity as the true religion by proving that its precepts were statements of fact. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “religion” came to signify a system of metaphysical statements. Within this discourse, to be religious was to believe a set of such statements, to know them to be true. As Talal Asad has argued, this emphasis on belief “meant that henceforth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as between different religions and as against natural science.”\(^3\)

But even as this concept solved certain apologetic problems for those who helped formulate it, it also made religion vulnerable to challenge from new quarters. Though direct conflict with scientific discoveries would come later, the most pressing challenge to Christianity at the turn of the 19th century was the rise of German biblical scholarship that challenged the


\(^2\) These common notions were the essence of true religion: There is a God; God is to be worshipped; virtue and piety are the most important aspects of religious practice; we must repent wickedness; there is reward or punishment after this life. Harrison, 68-9.

\(^3\) Genealogies of Religion, 41. Asad’s larger argument is that the privileged Christian discourse of which this propositional faith plays such an important role has become the normative frame for our understanding (and misunderstanding) of non-Western traditions, especially Islam.
traditional view of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God: historical-critical scholarship established the scriptures as a collection of human documents authored, edited, redacted, compiled and canonized by fallible people responding to diverse historical circumstances. Like the Enlightenment theologians they aimed to supersede, nineteenth century Protestant theologians developed a new concept of religion to negotiate these apologetic challenges to Protestant Christianity.

The pivotal figure here is Friedrich Schleiermacher: admirers and critics alike acknowledge him as the father of Protestant modernism. Schleiermacher shifted the normative ground of Christian theology from the propositional language of belief, doctrine, and scripture to the methods by which theological propositions would be critically interpreted as human texts written in history, texts which nonetheless expressed an invaluable essence: for Schleiermacher, the essence of religion was an intuitive relation to infinite reality as it was manifested in the finite. Schleiermacher took it for granted that every historical religion had corrupted this intuition by articulating it in limited historical forms; he assumed the tendency of traditions to embroider the original intuition with mythology and metaphysics. “However deep this corruption may be rooted” in other faiths and in one’s own, the religious person was compelled to discover and release the original expression from beneath the weight of dogma and restrictive commands:

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22 For centuries, Christians had understood the world rendered and formed by the biblical narrative as the context for history; the task of readers had been to fit their own experience into that world. Readers had brought a broad range of sophisticated figural hermeneutics to this narrative, but, as Hans Frei has written, its direction “was that of incorporating extra-biblical thought, experience, and reality into the one real world detailed and made accessible by the biblical story.” The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3. In the late eighteenth century, historical criticism reversed this hermeneutic task: history became the real world in which the biblical texts appear and to which they refer. Frei notes that historicism ocasions a fracture within the capacious sense of “literal” reading that Luther and Calvin took for granted: literal reading included figuration without conflict. The “spirit” of the text was seen to fit to the letter: it was not necessary to push aside a contingent or limited expression to arrive at the “meaning” of the text, be it a reference to historical events, its doctrinal content, or its application in the spiritual or ethical life of the reader. The plain sense of the text included and was identical with all these. In the later eighteenth century, however, there appears “a logical distinction and a reflective distance between the stories and the ‘reality’ they depict” (5).
it is the “properly religious view of all things,” Schleiermacher declared, “to seek every trace of
the divine, the true, and the eternal, even in what appears to us to be vulgar and base, and to
worship even the most distant trace.”

As we shall see, this movement achieved a more subtle alignment with the ascendant
regime of natural scientific inquiry than its 18th century antecedents. Tactically subordinating the
authority of traditional Christian theology to the ascendant culture of rational explanation,
Protestant modernism established a legitimate place for “religion” within this new regime of
knowledge-production. It not only gave all the positive forms of religion over to investigation by
the natural and human sciences, it placed these skeptical methods at the center of a novel
conception of normative religious practice. Yet by defining the essence expressed by historical
forms as an intuition of the infinite—an intuition categorically outside the bounds of
propositional knowledge—Protestant modernism also resisted the totalizing claims of natural
science and philological historicism.

23 Friedrich Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers, trans. and ed. Richard
24 I conceive of Protestant modernism as an apologetic strategy developed according to a logic
analogous to what postcolonial theorists have called “hybridity.” Hybridity refers to the process by which
a subordinated group appropriates the cultural forms of the dominant group for their own defensive,
subversive, or self-determined ends. In Homi Bhabha’s initial formulation, hybridity “unsettles the
mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplies its identifications in strategies of
subversion;” it is “at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance.” Homi Bhabha, The Location of
Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 159-60; 172. Some users have broadened and flattened the term
include all instances of “cross-cultural exchange,” but what makes the concept useful in this case is the
insistence that hybridity refers to the production of cultural forms within the massively unequal structure
of colonial power relations. Here I am using the frame analogically, displacing hybridity from geopolitcal
power relations between metropole and colony to the historical power relations between a dominant
regime of truth-production and institutionally subordinated forms of knowing or being. Within this frame,
what makes Protestant modernism particularly interesting is that, by the late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries, it occupies a double position. Relative to the ascendant regime of science, it assumes
the posture of a minority culture, adapting itself to the terms of the dominant regime; at the same time,
however, by aligning itself with new institutions of knowledge production such as the research university,
Protestant modernism helps to create a new discourse of religion in which it stands as the dominant
culture to which all other theologies are subordinated.
This apologetic strategy placed Protestant modernism in an ambivalent relation to the Christian tradition that preceded it. By defining this essence of religion as epistemologically prior to and exceeding all attempts to express or conceive it, modernism deprived the tradition it aimed to defend of its normative force: the elements of that tradition were merely historically and culturally mediated expressions of something inexpressible. This created a crisis of authority within modernism itself. As part of its legitimation strategy, then, Protestant modernism defined itself in polemical opposition to a “naïve” inhabitation of that tradition. “To want to have and retain belief” in a religion’s truth-claims “proves that one is incapable of religion,” Schleiermacher wrote; “to require this kind of faith from others shows that one does not understand it.” Protestant modernism legitimized its own critical practice with a supersession narrative that authorized it to polemically reinterpret all propositional theologies according to its own totalizing hermeneutic.

ii.

The chapters that follow are concerned with the legacy of Protestant modernism as it came to cultural and institutional prominence in Britain and the United States in the late

25 In normativizing historicist criticism of that tradition, modernism extended the Protestant Reformers’ faith in the interpretive capacity of individuals. At the same time it shifted the grounds of that authority: Luther took it for granted that individuals could read scripture for themselves because the Holy Spirit guided their encounter with a “perspicuous” scripture; Calvin presumed something similar with his sensus divinitatis. The modernists accorded individuals the authority to reinterpret not just scripture but the whole infrastructure of Christian tradition based on a) their innate capacity for intuition of the infinite and b) the epistemological authority of modern, skeptical methods. See chapter 2 below.

26 OR, 50.

27 The point I am trying to make is that in appropriating many of the presuppositions and methods of modern inquiry, Protestant modernism also assumes a novel form of theological authority. By establishing a new discourse of what religion was and institutionalizing that discourse in new institutions of knowledge-production such as the modern research university, Protestant modernism establishes the normative terms upon which other theologies are compelled to justify themselves. As we shall see in the second chapter, reactions against these terms lead to further new and inventive reading practices and new conceptions of the Bible that are designed to achieve legitimacy on those terms even as they seek to disrupt and subvert their power.
nineteenth century. Yet it is worth looking closely at the movement’s founding document, Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *On Religion*, first published anonymously in 1799. This document is in a sense the most extreme statement of the modernist project: though our primary concern is with the more muddied institutional afterlife of Schleiermacher’s ideas, their unequivocal statement in *On Religion* clarifies the apologetic problems that the movement was intended to solve and the problems the movement in turn created.

*On Religion* was so profoundly influential because it articulated a new framework for discourse about religion: a framework that addressed the challenges to eighteenth-century theology. Yet it was also addressed to a more local community. Schleiermacher wrote for his friends in the Berlin Circle that gathered at the home of Henriette Herz: Dorothea Viet, the von Humboldts, the Schlegel brothers, and others whom scholars now recognize as the major players in early Romanticism. The text is composed of five “speeches” addressed these friends—affectionately referred to in the subtitle as religion’s “cultured despisers.” *On Religion* was written at their behest: the group’s members were intensely curious as to how their brilliant friend could maintain his pastoral vocation in good conscience.  

Schleiermacher’s speeches were attempts to persuade these early romantic readers that religion in its essence was actually quite close to their hearts.

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29 Schleiermacher used specific conceptual tropes that were current among the early romantics in his effort at persuasion: his first speech to frame the whole work as the quest for a ground upon which two ideas, evidently opposed, could appear in dynamic, vibrant tension; the third speech is devoted to the role of religion in *Bildung*—the project of continual self-cultivation; the fourth takes up the question of religion’s ideal role in the *Frühromantik* political project of forming of organic communities rooted in
As we have already glimpsed, Schleiermacher split the concept of religion into positive forms and its ineffable essence, and, most difficult to grasp, a new and normative practice of religion that held the two together. The text of On Religion can be difficult because it is not always immediately obvious which aspect of “religion” Schleiermacher is referring to.\(^{30}\) In the interests of clarity I will be as explicit as possible about when the text refers to religion’s essence, when Schleiermacher is discussing his ambivalent relation to actual, positive religions that express and corrupt that essence, and when he is outlining his concept of religion as it would be ideally manifested in the social world.\(^{31}\) Only when these three aspects are understood on their own terms can one understand the tense relations between them, and how these tensions are both extended and occluded in the literary hermeneutics with which the following chapters are concerned.

Most scholarly attention has focused on the second speech, which is where Schleiermacher lays out his theory of religion’s essence. In the most famous and critically contested line of the speeches, Schleiermacher wrote that the essence of religion “is neither equality and dynamic reciprocity. One implicit goal of this project is to extend or repeat the mode of analysis that Peter Harrison brought to “religion” in the English Enlightenment with respect to Protestant modernism in the nineteenth century. How did the methods that Schleiermacher called upon to investigate religion help to constitute religion as an object of analysis cut to fit those methods?

\(^{30}\) Attempting to revise the text for the 1806 2nd edition, Schleiermacher wrote to his friend Joachim Christian Gass that the original contained “unnecessary difficulties” and “no few burdensome inducements to misunderstanding.” Kritische Gesamtausgabe 1.12, xiii, quoted in Andrew Dole, Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2009), 3. Indeed, Schleiermacher uses the word “religion” to refer to a bewildering variety of phenomena: inner states and dispositions, practices and activities, beliefs and institutions, profoundly personal experiences and their communication in ritual and doctrine through history. Some of these Schleiermacher eagerly endorses; others he holds up for caustic criticism. Much of what would have appeared ostensibly “religious” to Schleiermacher’s readers he insists on calling “irreligious;” much of what he describes as the “essence” of religion appears paradoxical, perhaps intentionally difficult to grasp with a rational mind.

\(^{31}\) Here I am drawing on the helpful schema Andrew Dole provides in Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order, 79-81.
thinking nor acting”—neither metaphysics nor morality—“but intuition and feeling.”

Schleiermacher begins the speech by acknowledging that his audience may have ideas about what religion is: religion (as the dominant theorists of the eighteenth century would have it) is a body of beliefs about metaphysics or the transcendent; or, religion (as Kant deduced) is a system of moral duties perceived as divine commands. These Schleiermacher immediately discards: metaphysics and morality, he argues, have nothing to do with religion in its essence. They are at best secondary reflections upon it; far too often they have obscured this essence and been mistaken for it: “All these are only the extraneous parts that cling to it, and it should be our business to free it from them.”

In its essence, Schleiermacher argued, religion is a holistic, suprarational disposition toward the world given in experience. It is a “sensibility and taste” for the organic whole of the infinite universe as made obliquely manifest in every finite particle. The religious person “wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe’s own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe’s immediate influences in childlike passivity.”

This was language designed to appeal directly to the early romantics’ search for forms of mediation between the infinite universe and the inexorable finitude of human experience. Schlegel and Novalis were in these same years developing a concept of art—specifically

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32 OR 22. As Dole has argued, Schleiermacher’s “essentialism” is crucially different from the essentialism that defines objects according a defining property or collection of properties. “Essence” in Schleiermacher’s usage refers to the driving force of a multiform phenomenon, the principle of unity that pervades that phenomenon through its historical extension and development (Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order, 77-9). It is also important to note that “essence” also serves a critical function in Schleiermacher’s work. As Ernst Troeltsch noted, “It is not merely an abstraction from the manifestations, but at the same time a criticism of the manifestations, and this criticism is not merely an evaluation of that which is not yet complete in terms of the driving ideal, but a discrimination between that which corresponds to the essence and that which is contrary to it.” Writings on Theology and Religion, 141 quoted in Dole, 79).

33 ibid.

34 ibid.
poetry—as such a mediator. Schleiermacher claimed that the interpretive disposition toward all finite things as mediating manifestations of the infinite was the essence of religion. “To accept everything individual as a part of the whole and everything limited as a representation of the infinite is religion.”

The dominant reading of Schleiermacher has long been that “intuition and feeling” rooted the essence of religion in a subjective, affective, or mystical experience. By these lights, Schleiermacher’s redefinition was an ingenious apologetic response to Enlightenment critiques of religious belief and specifically to Kant, who had argued that metaphysical speculation (and with it almost all of traditional religious doctrine) was a misapplication of judgments from experience to a transcendental realm of which we can have no experience. As a sense that precedes and is independent of all thought, religion can never come into conflict with the

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35 “The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free.” Friedrich Schlegel, “Athenaeum Fragment 116,” *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1991): 31-2.

36 OR 25.

37 Hegel advanced this interpretation early and acidly: Schleiermacher’s religion “builds its temples and altars in the heart of the individual,” he wrote. “In sighs and prayers he seeks for the God whom he denies to himself in intuition, because of the risk that the intellect will cognize what is intuited as a mere thing, reducing the sacred grove to mere timber.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977): 57. This uncharitable reading heavily influenced Hegel’s student Ludwig Feuerbach, who would appropriate these terms a decade later as evidence for his anthropological approach to religion: “since feeling has been held the cardinal principle in religion, the doctrines of Christianity, formerly so sacred, have lost their importance. … [O]nce feeling has been pronounced to be the subjective essence of religion, it in fact is also the objective essence of religion.” Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) 10. This anthropocentrism of feeling was later at the center of Karl Barth’s critique of Schleiermacher: “we radically forget that in a meaningful statement about God, God can only be thought of as the subject and not the predicate. Instead we operate here with a concept of God as the ineffable infinite relationship of everything finite.” Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982): 259. For an important counterview of “feeling” as a phenomenological awareness, see Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Protestant Theology*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Harper & Row, 1967): 96; also Jeffrey Hoover, “The Mediated Self and Immediate Self-Consciousness in Schleiermacher’s Mature Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48.3 (2010): 375-396.
findings of modern science or with the advance of knowledge in any realm.\textsuperscript{38} In other words, recognizing that a faith constructed on metaphysical propositions had become untenable after Kant, Schleiermacher developed a theory of religion as precisely that which pierces the veil of appearance and offers direct experience of the noumenon.\textsuperscript{39}

As recent scholars have noted, there are several problems with this dominant account.\textsuperscript{40}

For Schleiermacher, the \textit{essence} of religion is not an authoritative revelation requiring

\textsuperscript{38} In Wayne Proudfoot’s influential account, Schleiermacher replied by redefining religion as the sphere in which the subject enters into a direct relation with the transcendent—a relationship that is unmediated by language, thought, or concept. As such, it remains unscathed by Kant’s contention that our experience is structured by the categories and thoughts we bring to it and thus that we produce rather than reproduce the world we think we know. \textit{Religious Experience} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). As I argue in the notes below, Proudfoot misprized Schleiermacher by reading \textit{On Religion} through the lens of later theorists he partially inspired. Yet I would hasten to add that Proudfoot’s larger argument about the “protectivist” strategy in religious studies does not depend on it.

\textsuperscript{39} We might call this influential reading of Schleiermacher “the subjectivist account.” \textit{On Religion} has been cast as the theoretical frame for the Pietist and Methodist movements that had been ascendant since the mid-eighteenth century and grew through the nineteenth and early twentieth. See W.C. Smith, 45 and, for a more recent example, Martin Jay, \textit{Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), esp. ch. 3. Schleiermacher had indeed been raised among the Moravian Brethren, a German Pietist community. These movements downplayed doctrine and cultivated instead an interior sensibility for the actions of the spirit upon the individual believer. Within the Reformed tradition Schleiermacher’s work has been blamed for the decline of its intellectual heritage and the rise of a sentimentalized and “feminized” faith. Paul Tillich chalks up this impact to Schleiermacher’s poor choice of term in \textit{Gefühl}: “immediately the psychologists came along and interpreted Schleiermacher’s concept of feeling as a psychological function.” As a result of this misunderstanding, “when religion was preached as feeling, the male section of the German congregations stopped going to church.” \textit{Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Protestant Theology}, 96-7. For trenchant reflections on the decline of the Calvinist intellectual heritage and the rise of a liberal Protestant sentimentalism in the American context, see Ann Douglas’ \textit{The Feminization of American Christianity} (New York: Noonday / Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1998 [1977]).

As a theory of religion, Schleiermacher’s work has been seen as the origin of a new school of thinkers who conceived of religion as irreducible to rational explanation and concerned primarily with subjective states: William James would write a century later that “feeling is the deeper source of religion.” \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience} (New York: Longmans, Green; 1902), 433. Perhaps more famously,\textsuperscript{40} Advocates of this subjectivist account have often critiquing Schleiermacher as a representative of what they take to be his legacy, rather than on his own terms. Andrew Dole, “Schleiermacher and Otto On Religion,” \textit{Religious Studies} 40.4 (2004): 389-413. Secondly, those that push the subjectivist account focuses almost exclusively on the second of the five speeches, in which Schleiermacher describes religion’s “essence.” The eminent scholar and translator Terence Tice has drily noted that “an astoundingly large proportion of the extensive literature on [Schleiermacher’s] conception of religion virtually ignores the final three” speeches. “Schleiermacher and the Study of Religion,” in \textit{Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Founding of the University of Berlin}, ed. Herbert Richardson (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellin Press, 1991), 45–82; 66.
interpretation and application, but an interpretive practice whose object is “the infinite” and which excludes the possibility of authoritative content. Acknowledging that the idea of the infinite is often spiritualized, Schleiermacher insisted it is not to be discovered beyond the natural world, but within it: within the “One and All” which is made manifest in the infinite diversity of the finite forms perceived in concrete, everyday experience. Of course, it is an illusion to seek the infinite precisely outside the finite, to seek the opposite outside that to which it is opposed…Is it not the illusion of whole peoples and whole schools of wisdom? Rather than providing unmediated knowledge of another, transcendent world, the essence of religion is an interpretive modality of being within this world.

The universe exists in uninterrupted activity and reveals itself to us in every moment. Every form that it brings forth, every being to which it gives separate existence according to the fullness of life, every occurrence that spills forth from its rich, ever-fruitful womb, is an action of the same upon us. Thus to accept everything individual as a part of the whole and everything limited as a representation of the infinite is religion. But whatever would go beyond that and penetrate deeper into the nature and substance of the whole is no longer religion, and will, if it still wants to be regarded as such, inevitably sink back into empty mythology.

Given the stress on the passivity and immediacy of intuition, it might seem strange to describe it as an interpretive relation to experience. Yet the last phrases here suggest that intuition is a willed disposition toward finite experience as a manifestation of the infinite acting upon us: one wills to accept it without making anything more out of it. As a practice of connecting every tiny

\[\text{This naturalism informed the earliest critiques of On Religion as “Spinozist” (meaning atheistic), which Schleiermacher did little to discourage. Late in the second speech he implores his readers to “respectfully offer up with me a lock of hair to the manes of the holy rejected Spinoza. … The high world spirit permeated him, the infinite was his beginning and end” (OR, 24). For a helpful discussion of how Schleiermacher negotiated between the Kantian and Spinozist philosophical traditions, see Julie Lamm, The Living God: Schleiermacher’s Theological Appropriation of Spinoza (University Park: Penn State UP, 1996), esp. chapters 1 and 2. For a counterview to Lamm, see Dalia T. Nassar, “Immediacy and Mediation in Schleiermacher’s Reden Über Die Religion,” The Review of Metaphysics 59.4 (2006): 807-40.}\]

\[\text{OR, 59.}\]

\[\text{OR, 25.}\]
part of finite experience in its givenness with the incomprehensible whole of the infinite universe, religion is a way of seeing, an interpretive discipline. And it is necessarily an infinite discipline. For in its “uninterrupted activity” the universe is continually revealing new facets of itself in new actions upon us, and there is no possibility for a completed vision, given that the infinite can never be compassed by anything finite. To maintain this discipline—to foreclose the possibility that such experience would produce reductive knowledge or communicable “belief”—made religion, for Schleiermacher, a “higher realism.” The essence of religion is a discipline of not knowing or not believing.

This project thus follows more recent scholarship—particularly that of Andrew Dole—that reads On Religion not as an end-run around Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena and other rational challenges to religion, but as an eager accommodation to Kantian epistemology and natural scientific modes of explanation. As Dole writes, Schleiermacher

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44 OR, 24.

45 While Schleiermacher rejected Kant’s reduction of religion to morality in his second Critique, he fit his own theory of religion into the epistemology Kant had developed in the first. Schleiermacher described the intuition of the infinite—the “crucial hinge” of religion’s essence—using Kant’s technical term Anschauung: the faculty that mediates between our inner life and external nature. Anschauung is the mode of sensibility in which we immediately relate to the noumenon, the real beyond our concepts. “In whatever manner and by whatever means a mode of knowledge may relate to objects, intuition is that through which it is in immediate relation to them, and to which all thought as a means is directed.” Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1934): 65. One can be confident that the objects of our intuition really exist; for, as Kant continues, “intuition takes place only in so far as the object is given to us.” Yet the central tradeoff in the Kantian system is that the immediate intuition of an object’s real existence qua noumenon comes at the price of any knowledge of its qualities: we sense that the object exists, but we cannot know what the object is except through phenomenal appearances—through a synthesis with the action of the understanding, which is dependent upon a priori categories. “Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought,” Kant wrote. “Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.” Critique of Pure Reason, 61 (A.51 B.75).

As Theodore Vial has noted, English readers are wont to think of intuition as akin to an unshakable hunch: knowing something to be true in the pit of our guts. “Anschauung and Intuition, Again,” in Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion, and the Future of Theology, ed. Brent Sockness and Wilhelm Gräb (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010): 39-50. The German word for the nonrational knowledge afforded by a hunch, however, is Ahnung (in an earlier spelling, Ahndung). In his theory of religious experience, Rudolf Otto invoked Ahnung as an a priori mode of apprehension by which religion offers nonrational access to
conceived of religion not as “an abstracted and ahistorical condition of human subjectivity” but as a “historically extended and culturally embodied sets of human attitudes, activities, practices, institutions, and artifacts.”

It was a radical step, presuming to explain religion without the benefit of clergy—that is, without the magisterial guidance of religious authorities—and, more radically, without ‘conversion’ or confessional and/or metaphysical commitments about its causes different from the assumptions one might use to understand and explain other realms of culture.

Schleiermacher does not rely on Christian doctrine as the foundation for his reflections, but rather sees those doctrines as part of the phenomenon of religion which was the object of his investigation. He conceives of positive religions as fully human, sociohistorical phenomena to be made sense of using modern means. As Dole writes elsewhere, Schleiermacher opens religion to investigation from the full range of human sciences, but locates its empirically falsifiable doctrinal truth-claims “on the periphery of religion rather than at its center.”

At the same time, Schleiermacher acknowledged that human beings are social beings: they are driven to share their intuitions of the infinite with others. The resulting discourse is the seed of actual religions. Positive faith traditions like Christianity or Buddhism or Islam are ultimately rooted in their founders’ particularly strong intuition of the infinite in the finite. Given

the noumenal realm, which was for Otto the abode of the divine. See Dole, “Schleiermacher and Otto,” esp. 398. Otto drew on the work of Jakob Friedrich Fries (and explicitly discussing his preference for Fries over Schleiermacher), Otto was indeed enthusiastic about Schleiermacher’s work early in his career, yet scholars who see Otto’s theory as an inevitable extension of that On Religion have missed Otto’s explicit discussion of why Schleiermacher’s Anschauung was insufficient for his own theory of religion. See Otto, 146ff.

Yet Schleiermacher insists that intuition does not result in knowledge of any kind, natural or supernatural. As in Kant, intuition refers to the faculty of sensibility that provides raw material for cognition from empirical experience, but it itself is “blind” as to what that experience is, because its sense of the action of things upon the subject has yet to be synthesized with a priori categories. Schleiermacher writes: “what you thus intuit and perceive is not the nature of things, but their action upon you. What you know or believe about the nature of things lies far beyond the realm of intuition” (OR, 25, my emphasis).

Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order, 23.

ibid, 9. Here Dole quotes J.S. Preus’s account of religious naturalism in Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987), x.

ibid, 8.

that the object of such intuition is the infinite universe, infinite intuitions are possible, and thus
their expressions could be the germ of any number of positive religions. For the same reason, no
positive religion can claim to be the singular and comprehensive revelation of the infinite. The
intuition at the heart of every faith tradition is independent and untranslatable, and no tradition
that remains faithful to its original intuition supervenes another.

Yet all religions are inevitably drawn away from their original intuition by the centrifugal
force of language and concept: the loose and provisional idea of the infinite gradually becomes
lost as disciples develop empty customs and abstract conceptual systems. “Such corruption is
generally unavoidable,” Schleiermacher glumly concedes, “as soon as the infinite takes on an
imperfect and limited raiment, and descends into the realm of time and the universal sway of
finite things to let itself be dominated by it.”  

Every positive religion is born out of a “glowing
outpouring” of religious intuition, but in time cools and hardens into “dead slag.”

In the early speeches, Schleiermacher is fairly consistent in his polemical hostility to
actual religions. Their ritual forms and sacred texts are but the dead husks of a living experience.

Every holy writing is merely a mausoleum of religion, a monument that a great spirit was
there that no longer exists; for if it still lived and were active, why would it attach such
great importance to the dead letter that can only be a weak reproduction of it? It is not the
person who believes in a holy writing who has religion, but only the one who needs none
and probably could make one for himself.

In the fifth and final speech, however, as he pivots toward his novel apologia for Christianity,
Schleiermacher takes a much more ambivalent position. He acknowledges that actual religious
traditions can awaken the individual’s appetite for religious intuition, and he even affirms that
positive forms, statements, and doctrines are almost always necessary: while there are some
religious virtuosos who can intuit the infinite without any help or training, most people require a

\[\text{\textsuperscript{50}} \text{OR, 99.} \]
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\[\text{\textsuperscript{52}} \text{OR, 50.} \]
positive religious tradition to form their sensibility for the infinite in the finite. Moreover, Schleiermacher is aware that one can be so suspicious of religious traditions that one closes oneself off from any intuition whatsoever, and so from its transformative power: such persons “resist every particular religion because it is at the same time a school; but if they encountered something through which a religion of their own was about to be formed in them, they would resist it just as violently because a school might arise from it.” 53 With the rare exception of the religious genius, individuals require formation, and formation requires a capacity to surrender to the specific terms in which one tradition articulates the object of their intuitions and feelings: “only the person who settles down in such a form with his own religion really establishes a firm abode and, might I say, an active citizenship in the religious world; […] only he is a truly religious person with a character and fixed and definite traits.” 54 Those who bristle at the thought of participation in a positive tradition, he writes, are “simultaneously … bristling against everything definite and real.” 55

This ambivalence is close to the heart of what Schleiermacher means by ideal religion. The ideally religious person must be an “active citizen” of one particular tradition, surrendering to its formative influence; at the same time, such a person must actively critique that tradition, continually seeking the essence that its rituals, doctrines, and institutions have obscured or corrupted. “However deep this corruption may be rooted,” the ideally religious person is compelled to discover and release the original expression from beneath the weight of dogma and

53 OR, 110. Schleiermacher’s target here are likely those, like Herbert of Cherbury, who ascribed to a skeletal outline of “natural religion.”
54 OR, 104.
55 OR, 110. At the same time, one is to remain always cognizant that positive religions—even one’s own—are always only provisional heuristics. “You cannot say that your horizon, even the broadest, comprehends everything and that nothing more is to be intuited beyond it, or that nothing within this horizon escapes your eye.” Such humility also corresponds to an appealing notion of tolerance: one can remain open to visions of the infinite glimpsed from other perspectives, because no final and complete picture is possible.
restrictive commands. It is the “properly religious view of all things,” Schleiermacher declares, “to seek every trace of the divine, the true, and the eternal, even in what appears to us to be vulgar and base, and to worship even the most distant trace.”

This is the principle upon which Schleiermacher stakes his apology for Christianity. His argument, rather, is that Christianity—and it is obvious that Schleiermacher means Protestant Christianity—is the only positive religion that expresses itself through this practice of critical interpretation rather than through a steady calcification of its beliefs. It alone is self-conscious of the historical and finite nature of its own founding intuition. It alone is aware of the inevitable corruption of religious intuitions by the irreligious principle. It alone seeks within religions that have become “vulgar and base”—and within its own corrupted history—the “most distant trace” of the divine.

Christianity, Schleiermacher writes, treats “religion itself as material for religion.” That is, Christianity engages with positive religion—traditions organized around uncritical belief—as the “material” upon which it performs the practice that defines Schleiermacher’s ideal religion—

56 OR, 99. It is worth noting the expansive scope of this seeking. In the second speech, Schleiermacher describes the object of this critical interpretation

57 Schleiermacher’s mature work of Christian dogmatics The Christian Faith dealt in greater depth with Christianity’s doctrinal claims, although always treating centering Christian theology as the most developed expression of an immediate experience of a paradigmatically “religious self-consciousness,” which Schleiermacher called a “feeling of absolute dependence.” The Christian Faith, eds. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Berkeley: The Apocryphile Press, 2011). In his speeches On Religion, however, he is almost entirely uninterested in the specificity of Christian theology. Schleiermacher allows that Christianity’s central story—the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—is an excellent allegory for the mediation of the infinite in the finite which characterizes the practice of religion for Schleiermacher. “It is none other than the intuition of the universal straining of everything finite against the unity of the whole and of the way in which the deity handles this striving, how it reconciles the enmity directed against it and sets bounds to the ever-greater distance by scattering over the whole individual points that are at once finite and infinite, at once human and divine. Corruption and redemption, enmity and mediation are two sides of this mediation that are inseparably bound to each other, and the shape of all religious material in Christianity and its whole form are determined through them” (OR, 115). As such, Christianity is a kind of meta-religion: its doctrinal material is legible (by readers sympathetic to Schleiermacher’s theory) as a commentary on religious intuition as the means by which human life is reconciled to the infinite which it forgets in speculation and praxis.

58 OR, 116.
the intuition of the infinite in the finite. Christianity is defined by the critical process of recovering the original connection to the infinite that every church corrupts, obscures, or forgets. This ideal Christianity, therefore, is “thoroughly polemical:”

in order to make clear its innermost nature it must everywhere disclose all corruption, be it in morals or in the manner of thinking, and above all in the irreligious principle itself. Without mercy it therefore unmasks every false morality, every inferior religion, every unfortunate mixture of the two whereby their mutual nakedness is supposed to be covered; it penetrates into the innermost secrets of the corrupted heart and illuminates every evil that lurks in the darkness with the holy torch of its own experience.  

This polemic is not only directed outward toward “every inferior religion,” but is also focused internally, on those aspects of the Christian tradition that have calcified into metaphysical systems or moral platitudes. Schleiermacher argues that Christianity is the superior positive religion because its historical tradition reflects the will to continually correct its own tragic slide into dry theology and a superstitious false consciousness. “Never satisfied with its attainment, it seeks, even in the purest intuitions, even in its holiest feelings, traces of the irreligious and the tendency of everything finite to be turned away from and opposed to the universe.” Schleiermacher calls it “religion raised to a higher power.”

iii.

For Schleiermacher, then, religion was not to be believed; it was to be read. What would constitute a faithful reading? Or, to put the question another way, to what would Schleiermacher’s ideal Christian be faithful as an “active citizen” of that tradition? The answer appears intriguingly multiple. On the one hand, the reader would be faithful to modern methods of critical, naturalistic and historicist inquiry, treating positive religion like any other human phenomenon: Schleiermacher opened up the possibility of pursuing such inquiries as acts of  

59 OR, 117.
60 OR, 118-9.
devotion. On the other hand, readers would remain faithful to the idea that even the most corrupted forms of such positive religions expressed religion’s essence. Many of Schleiermacher’s heirs would define this essence in terms more continuous with the Christian tradition: Christian doctrine was the “husk” that surrounded the “kernel” of Christ’s teachings, which remained a bedrock of belief. Others pursued philologically and historically informed biblical interpretation in order “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon them,” neither disproving nor damaging Christianity, but allowing its timeless and universal message to “break[] through the accidents of time and place in which it is involved.” As these modernists would argue, the disenchantment of the text itself would ultimately serve the reader in approaching the “abiding experiences” that the “original mental frameworks” of the biblical authors did not so much contain as gesture toward.

Schleiermacher’s apologetic strategy was revolutionary. It was also recursive, invoking the tragically familiar frame of Christian supersessionism. The apostle Paul had called the early Christians beyond “mechanical” obedience to the letter of the Law and to open themselves to the work of the spirit within them, which was leading them to a redeeming faith in the risen Christ. He wrote to the Corinthians:

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62 Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” *Essays and Reviews* (London: John W. Parker and Son, West Strand, 1860) 330-433; 339; 412. Following Schleiermacher, Jowett’s goal was to reconstruct the original—the historically and culturally located—meaning of each biblical text. “Scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had to the mind of the prophet or evangelist who first uttered or wrote, to the hearers or readers who first received it” (378).
64 For a useful overview of the contemporary German discourse surrounding Judaism, see Jeffrey Librett, *Orientalism and the Figure of the Jew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts…. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory; for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory! Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.\textsuperscript{65}

In \textit{On Religion}, Schleiermacher invokes this tradition explicitly. He singles out Judaism as the paradigm of a legalistic, literal, and “primitive” religion that is closed to new revelation and new ideas.\textsuperscript{66} Schleiermacher writes that Judaism is long since a dead religion. It died when its holy books were closed; then the conversation of Jehovah with his people was viewed as ended; the political association that was linked to it dragged on in an ailing existence, and its external parts were preserved even longer still, the unpleasant appearance of a mechanical movement after the life and spirit had long since departed.\textsuperscript{67}

As Arnold would after him, Schleiermacher reduces the richness of Jewish tradition to rigid obedience to the “letter” of the law; he depicts Judaism as repressed and repressive, hard-hearted and stubborn in its deluded devotion to an “old” Covenant. “A veil lies over their minds.” Yet Schleiermacher’s polemical attack on Judaism was not in the service of a defense of Christian revelation as traditionally understood; he was not cajoling his audience into adopting (or at least

\textsuperscript{65} 2 Corinthians 3:1b-17, \textit{New Revised Standard Version}.

\textsuperscript{66} Judaism “constitutes such a remarkable example of the corruption and total disappearance of religion from a great body in which it was formerly found.” \textit{OR}, 114.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{OR}, 114-5.
appreciating) orthodox Christian beliefs. Schleiermacher instead turns this pernicious trope of Jewish legalism to new ends. He appropriates this supersessionist formula to cast an unprecedented understanding of Christianity as the way of freedom and glory.

Schleiermacher instead uses the supersessionist formula to apologize for a new form of religiosities that understands itself to have moved beyond belief. Schleiermacher makes Judaism a synecdoche for naïve belief in any and all positive religions—including Christianity. Such belief represents the “enmity” of the finite turned against the infinite. It partakes of “the self-seeking endeavor of individual nature that everywhere tears itself loose from relationship with the whole in order to be something for itself:” as such they are “evil.” Over against this naïve literalism (and on the side of the living “spirit”) Schleiermacher defends his own novel concept of Christianity as the critical disposition that can perceive the trace of the infinite even amidst such enmity. And as he used Judaism synecdochally for such literalistic misprision, Schleiermacher expands the connotative range of Christianity, which comes to include all persons who seek the infinite in all finite things, even in the corrupted form of positive religious traditions that misunderstand themselves as true. “People who make the same intuition the basis of their religion are Christians without regard to the school, whether their religion be derived historically from themselves or from someone else.” All people who relate self-consciously to the original intuition that remains at the center of their faith tradition—whatever that tradition may be—are understood to be “Christians.”

Given that this modernist Christianity cannot make any positive normative claims, this supersessionist creates an additional conceptual problem for Schleiermacher and his heirs: it is an apologetic mode that paradoxically requires the persistence of the “dead letter” as that against

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68 OR, 115.
69 OR, 121.
which the “spirit” defines its own life. Protestant modernism is doubly dependent on the unreflective, credulous, and literalist form of positive religion it claims to replace and so boldly rereads. First, we recall that for Schleiermacher the essence of religion is a form of not knowing, a discipline of resistance to the application of category and concept that Schleiermacher finds reductive and indeed corrupting of religious intuitions. (Schleiermacher thus struggles—by necessity—to render this essence descriptively: “Would that I could and might express it, at least indicate it, without having to desecrate it!”70) So his presentation of religion’s “essence” departs from and continually returns to a negative definition: he can only describe this essence by defining them against “metaphysics and morality.” The essence of religion in an intuition of the infinite is defined against those propositional statements that unwittingly “desecrate” the infinite by reducing it to a single articulation.

There is a second form of dependence, however. Recall that “in order to make clear its innermost nature [Christianity] must everywhere disclose all corruption, be it in morals or in the manner of thinking, and above all in the irreligious principle itself.” The obedient beliefs of positive religion are the “material” upon which Schleiermacher’s ideal Christianity performs its hermeneutic task. Without taking positive religions as an object of its polemical interpretation, Christianity cannot actualize itself by unmasking corruption and revealing the essence obscured beneath it. Given that Schleiermacher has established that authentic intuitions of the infinite are inevitably corrupted by their articulation, this ideal Christianity will never lack for illusion to illuminate with the “holy torch of its own experience.”71

iv.

70 OR, 32.  
71 OR, 117.
When Protestant modernism came to cultural and institutional power in Britain and the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, its reading practices took root not because of this polemical supersessionist discourse was particularly effective, but because these methods solved problems in biblical interpretation.\textsuperscript{72} Yet I have stressed this oppositional

\textsuperscript{72} Despite the hostility of his rhetoric regarding scripture as but the “dead letter” of a living experience, Schleiermacher was obviously passionate about their proper interpretation. He went on to a career as professor of New Testament in Halle and later as the founding chair of theology at the new University of Berlin; in lectures he gave between 1805 and 1833, edited and published only posthumously by his student Lücke, Schleiermacher indeed went on to develop what is recognized as the first system of modern hermeneutics. Though the project aspired to be a \textit{general} hermeneutics, providing the philosophical grounds for the interpretation of communications ancient and modern, oral and written, scriptural and secular, Schleiermacher’s own scriptural priorities are clear: throughout his lectures, he drew his examples from vexing questions of New Testament interpretation. I have drawn on Andrew Bowie’s edition and translation: Friedrich Schleiermacher, \textit{Hermeneutics and Criticism} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Hereafter \textit{HC}.

On a broader level, these lectures rework the problem that Schleiermacher had installed at the heart of religion in more general problem of hermeneutics: as in \textit{On Religion} Schleiermacher had posited that actual religions only partially express the essentially religious intuition of the infinite that gave rise to it (and in expressing that intuition inevitably corrupt it), in his lectures on hermeneutics, Schleiermacher posited that thinking is completely tied up with language, and yet language is not adequate to thought. Having posed the hermeneutic problem as one of impossible expression, Schleiermacher tried several different angles of attack. As Paul Ricoeur has stressed, Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic theorizing continued to evolve throughout his lectures; his inability to resolve the internal contradictions within his theory probably explain why the work was never completed and published. “Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutics,” \textit{The Monist} 60.2 (April 1977), 181-97. In his early lectures, Schleiermacher divided the hermeneutic enterprise into two discrete tasks that corresponded to the double nature of discourse as both common to all (given that language itself is created by no one individual) and yet serves as the vehicle for singular intentions and private thoughts. “Grammatical interpretation” focused on the former aspect: on the common medium of communication. Understanding is predicated first on fluency with the communicative potential available within a given language: for example, the capacity to parse the multiple meanings of a single word, or to grasp how a particular language system divides a specific conceptual field (perhaps differently than other languages might). Such proficiency in the working of a language system was to be balanced by “technical interpretation,” by which an interpreter attempts to reconstruct the subjectivity of the speaker, moving through all the possibilities available within the field of language to the thought that gave rise to it this particular utterance.

After 1819, however, Schleiermacher increasingly replaces “technical” interpretation with what he comes to call “psychological” interpretation, which seeks not to understand the singularity of the utterance vis-à-vis the whole discursive field, but which more explicitly attempts to reconstruct the author’s intention. “Every act of understanding is the inversion of a speech-act, during which the thought which was the basis of the speech must become conscious” (\textit{HC}, 7). Furthermore, he superimposes an additional pair of opposites onto the grammatical-psychological: that of divination and comparison. In the act of divination, in the attempt to grasp the singular meaning of author or speaker, “one, so to speak, transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly” (92). Achieving some insight into the work or the author, the reader then subjects that insight to comparison with other subjectivities, beginning with one’s own.
rhetoric and its supersessionist frame because it was this aspect of Protestant modernism that Matthew Arnold unwittingly imported into the disciplinary identity and practice of literary studies. This project’s first chapter offers a rereading of Arnold’s famous remark of 1880 that “most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.” In the context of biblical and religious criticism that Arnold wrote over the decade preceding it, the remark appears not as a prophecy of secularization, but as a more narrow attack on those Puritan Nonconformists that refused to join the Church of England for which Arnold advocated throughout his mature criticism, and which he conceived according to modernist tenets: it would be an establishment for the formation of an interpretive sensibility rather than the inculcation of right belief. That is, the chapter argues that Arnold’s targeted polemic against a rival theology has been mistaken for a blanket repudiation of all religion, whose spiritual values would be carried forth in the study of literature.

In fact, the chapter argues, Arnold trusted that literary study would help cultivate in the middle classes those qualities of “flexibility, perceptiveness, and judgment” required to approach the Bible as poetry—as words “thrown out at an object of consciousness not fully grasped.” Disciplined by wide reading in “the best that has been thought and said,” they would easily brush aside the layers of traditional and doctrinal gloss that had accrued to the text, to discover moving

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Building on the work of Manfred Frank, Schleiermacher translator and scholar Andrew Bowie has argued that scholars have overemphasized the subjective immediacy of the empathetic or “divinatory” moment in Schleiermacher’s thought: his primary target is Hans-Georg Gadamer; focusing on Schleiermacher’s grammatical interpretation, Bowie argues that Schleiermacher there outlines a more nuanced and sophisticated position (in fact, quite close to that of Gadamer) in which all human experience is mediated by a historical linguistic horizon. See Andrew Bowie, “Gadamer and Romanticism,” in Gadamer’s Repercussions, ed. Bruce Krajewski (University of California Press, 2004): 55-81 and Andrew Bowie, Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).


expressions of a spiritual experience they would recognize as universal, and as their own: rather than serving as a replacement for religion, literary study would be a crucial spiritual discipline. Finally, the chapter argues that Arnold’s refusal to describe the object of his faith in propositional terms more specific than “the Eternal” meant that his self-consciously critical religious sensibility was most clearly defined in opposition to the propositional beliefs of his Puritan contemporaries: those he called “Hebraists.” Arnold thus recursively perpetuates the discursive dependence of criticism upon the stubbornly naïve beliefs it is supposed to supersede.

This dissertation’s second chapter offers an account of the American New Criticism as a radicalization of the Protestant modernist fidelity to the manifestation of the infinite in every finite thing. This movement in criticism took as the object of its close attention a form of poetry that honored every element of human experience as “real, individual, and qualitatively infinite.”

Poetry disclosed the immediacy and fullness of human experience, what John Crowe Ransom called “an order of existence which in actual life is constantly crumbling beneath [one’s] touch.” Like Schleiermacher before them, Ransom and his student Cleanth Brooks rooted their textual hermeneutics in the pursuit and praise of an order of existence that was manifest in but also inevitably corrupted by “actual life” and actual, historical institutions. Schleiermacher had polemically attacked the propositional Protestantism of his contemporary theological rivals as occluding religion’s essence with a doctrinal edifice; Ransom and Brooks attacked “professors” of literature who read poetry not as self-authorizing disclosures of poetic knowledge, but as expressions of a human subjectivities or as historical artifacts: they were read for what the author meant to communicate or what they expressed about the time and place that produced them and to which they were addressed.

75 “Criticism, Inc.,” TWB, 348.
This chapter argues that Ransom and Brooks’ ideal of close reading was both an extension and a subversion of Protestant modernist hermeneutics. It remained militantly faithful to a qualitatively infinite order of experience as the ideal object of human attention and the ideal ground of human society; it extended the “thoroughly polemical” relation to the finite historical institutions that characterized Schleiermacher’s ideal Christianity. But their apologia for poetry as the manifestation of such experience led Brooks and Ransom to attack the historicist hermeneutics through which Schleiermacher and his heirs had legitimized their continued investment in positive religious traditions—as mediated expressions of ineffably immediate intuitions.

This chapter argues that the institutional context for these developments is crucial: Ransom and Brooks were not only intent on attacking “professors” of literature; they wanted to displace the professors from the position of authority they enjoyed within nascent departments of English in colleges and universities and to assume that authority itself. To do so, however, meant developing a hermeneutic that would be faithful not only to poetic knowledge, but to the increasingly dispassionate and objective ethos of scientific knowledge-production within the research university; it meant developing a new ideology of poetry as a form of human life whose internal complexity and infinite value could be proven by the application of specialized and scientific techniques that could never compass the holistic order of experience to which it offered access.

The cost of this strategy, I argue, can be illuminated by reading this apologetic reconception of poetry alongside roughly contemporary innovations in biblical hermeneutics that were likewise designed to contest the privileged place that historicist methods enjoyed within the university. The chapter illuminates the degree to which both apologetic strategies were shaped by
the methodological naturalism they were designed to contest. This chapter does not argue for a historical link between “fundamentalist” biblical criticism and the New Criticism or between the ideologies of the text to which they were addressed: I have found no evidence of historical connection between these communities, and indeed their reading practices were developed to defend and legitimate radically different theologies. Rather their parallels serve as evidence that conservative readers recognized that the university had become a site of religious authority, and that protecting or advancing their own theology—regardless of what that theology was—required a degree of accommodation to its methodological norms.

The final chapter of this dissertation turns to T.S. Eliot. Eliot’s early critical essays had a tremendous impact on Brooks and Ransom: *The Sacred Wood* developed some of the oppositions that would become the hermeneutic architecture of the New Criticism. With its scientific rhetoric, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” inspired the anti-sentimental approach to poetry as an empirical object of analysis. “The Metaphysical Poets” provided a declension narrative that explained modernity as the loss of a holistic aesthetic and ethical sensibility—which the Brooks and Ransom would attempt, in their way, to recover. This chapter however focuses on the reading practices that Eliot developed as he came to find that early work limited. So, on the one hand, this last chapter of the dissertation moves backwards—back in time from Brooks and Ransom’s most influential work in the 30s and 40s to the tender, difficult years in the late 1920s and early 30s when Eliot was sorting out the interpretive implications and imperatives of his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. On the other hand, this disruption in chronology allows us to see how Eliot attempted to move forward, how he tried to move beyond the oppositions in his early criticism that Brooks and Ransom reified.
Within the context of this project, Eliot’s conversion is important to grapple with for two reasons. First, Eliot’s particular and public form of religiosity looms large in the disciplinary imagination: politically reactionary, obsessively orthodox, proudly anti-modern. Conceived in these terms, Eliot’s conversion—the most available evidence of religion’s continued entanglement with literary criticism in this period—ironically confirms the concept of religion which, in the discipline’s secularization narratives, was fading away. This chapter aims to account for Eliot’s conversion in a way that balances Eliot’s desire for purity and order with his desire for disciplines that would transform his most basic interpretive habits.

In a reading of *Ash-Wednesday*, I argue that the struggle of Eliot’s conversion hinged on his hesitation to let go of interpretive habits that reified his own power and agency over against a tradition whose discipline he desired, whose formation he sought in order to become the person he wanted to be. Despite Eliot’s antipathy to forms of liberalism—religious, political, and aesthetic—he remained ambivalent about surrendering the authority liberalism ascribes to the individual over against religious, political and aesthetic traditions. This is the second reason Eliot’s conversion is important for this project. Attending to this methodological valence of Eliot’s conversion allows us to understand it as an extension of modernist ambivalence toward the normative force of traditions as ethical disciplines of subject-formation. Moreover it is an occasion to grapple with the ways in which the discipline of literary criticism understands how it is that we go about changing our minds and living out those changes in our practice.
“What is the New Christianity to Be Like?”
Matthew Arnold’s Forgotten Apologia

Matthew Arnold’s most quoted statements about religion have been read as testimonies to its obsolescence. His poems have long served as commonplaces in narratives of nineteenth century secularization: in the familiar lines of “Dover Beach,” the “Sea of Faith” appears only in retreat, as noise without signal; the speaker listens in lamentation to “its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.” In “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse,” the speaker wanders “between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born.” These poems have been read emblematically, these lines as slogans for the Victorian period as an “age of transition:” an age of people wracked by doubt, remembering a time in which a spiritual reality felt real and accessible and feeling still that it might be buried beneath the pursuit of material progress and political liberty, but increasingly resigned to its inaccessibility.

This air of spiritual disease has infected the reception of Arnold’s later prose. As mature literary critic and cultural theorist, Arnold has been read as fully reconciled to the disenchantment he had lamented in these poems. The demise of religion was imminent, and Arnold opportunistically proposed that literature (more specifically, “poetry;” more broadly, “culture”) could serve as religion’s replacement. This latter narrative also has its commonplace,

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2 Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957), 1. For Houghton’s informative overview of the changes in religious beliefs and attitudes during the period, see especially 93-180.
3 For one influential use of “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse” as representative of a larger, world-historical move away from religious participation in a symbolically charged world he traces across the century, see J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 5. For his illuminating discussion of Arnold’s poetry, see also 212-69.
in the opening paragraphs of Arnold’s 1880 essay “The Study of Poetry.” “There is not a creed which is not shaken,” Arnold wrote, “not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve.” The historical-critical reading of the Bible had revealed the scriptures to be human documents, partial and fallible as any other; discoveries in geology and biology had further troubled the Genesis account of a divinely created and ordered cosmos; a modern demand for proof cast the Bible’s miraculous narratives as increasingly quaint. “Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it.” As a result, Arnold wrote,

“More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.”

The essay originally served as the introduction to T.H. Ward’s two-volume anthology *The English Poets*. In that context, the essay appeared to announce the verses to follow as substitute scriptures, and the total anthology as a new and durable testament for spiritually-minded moderns. One canonical gloss was given by T.S. Eliot, who took this passage to mean that poetry would be “a capital substitute for religion,” emotionally evocative but without any doctrines to be disputed by the ascendant regime of modern, skeptical knowledge: “coffee without caffeine, and tea without tannin.”

Writing in 1930, shortly after his conversion to a high Anglo-

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4 *The Collected Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. ix, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972), 161-2. Hereafter *CPW*, with volume number and page. The opening paragraph from “The Study of Poetry” is cannibalized the conclusion to an essay Arnold had written the previous year, entitled “On Poetry.” That conclusion begins with this declaration, drawing on his infamous definition from *Literature and Dogma* (*CPW* vi; 176): “The reign of religion as morality touched with emotion is indeed indestructible” (*CPW* x: 63, emphasis mine, see R.H. Super’s editorial note, x.314). In that earlier essay, Arnold defines poetry (against science) as that which “thinks emotionally” and explicitly aligns it with religion. Poetry “gives the idea, but gives it touched with beauty, heightened by emotion” (62).

5 *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 17.
Catholicism, Eliot saw Arnold’s writings on religion as “tediously negative,” seeming to say again and again “merely that the Christian faith is of course impossible to the man of culture.”

This reading has had important disciplinary effects: as Michael Kaufmann has written, this “Arnoldian replacement narrative” has become so entrenched as an etiological myth of professional literary studies “that it now functions more as a rhetorical gesture than a deliberative argument.” Religion had become too inflexible and dogmatic to transmit moral and spiritual values: the purportedly “secular” humanities took up the torch.

Arnold indeed believed that English society could no longer be spiritually united by “the Christian faith” in the sense that Eliot would soberly defend it in 1930. That was a Christianity defined by belief: by the collective affirmation of its doctrines’ supernatural truth. Like many of his contemporaries, Arnold felt that the feudal age, “with its ideas and habits of subordination,” was coming to an end, and the Christianity that had served that age was now doubly weak. As the middle class was newly empowered by political reforms, he feared that “the old popular religion” of superstition and miracle that energized so many of its members was soon to crumble.

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6 “Arnold and Pater,” 349.
8 For the Victorians’ sense of transition from a stable and hierarchical medieval society to a too-be-determined modern arrangement, see Houghton, 2-8. Arnold’s fear that the liberal alternative to feudalism would be unbridled individual freedom: anarchy. Arnold’s third way was of course “culture,” that “much wanted principle” of authority that would ensure the right use of individual freedom. See the “Doing as One Likes” chapter of Culture and Anarchy, CPW iii: 115-36.
under the weight of scientific counterevidence and critical scholarship that amply demonstrated that the scriptures were historical and fallible human documents. The ascent of these classes to political power, Arnold feared, would coincide with the loss of their moral rudder. Arnold feared too that Anglican orthodoxy—a “religion of abstractions and intellectual refinements”—would never move the minds of the masses, whose ascent to the franchise was surely to follow: to serve effectively the institution that would form a spiritually united English people, the national Church needed more persuasive footing than the dry doctrines enumerated in the 39 Articles.

In the famous passage from “The Study of Poetry,” however, Arnold was not in fact proposing that religion would be supplanted by poetry, but that “what now passes with us for religion” would be necessarily transformed. Moreover it would be the study of poetry that would effect this transformation: “I am persuaded,” Arnold had written just three years prior, “that the transformation of religion, which is essential for its perpetuance, can be accomplished only by carrying the qualities of flexibility, perceptiveness, and judgment, which are the best fruits of letters, to whole classes of the community which now know next to nothing of them, and by procuring the application of those qualities to matters where they are never applied now.”

9 Arnold wrote to his mother that “to profess to see Christianity through the spectacles of a number of second or third-rate men who lived in Queen Elizabeth’s time (and this is what office-holders under the Thirty-Nine Articles do)—men whose works one never dreams of reading for the purpose of enlightening and edifying oneself—is an intolerable absurdity, and that it is time to put the formularies of the Church of England on a solder basis.” To Mary Penrose Arnold, 17 December 1862, The Letters of Matthew Arnold, vol. ii, ed. Cecil Y. Lang (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), 172.

10 The “Arnoldian replacement narrative” falls apart after even a cursory look at the basic textual details of the infamous passage from “The Study of Poetry.” The passage itself is overtly self-referential. James Livingston notes that which has escaped many critics—despite Arnold’s explicit apology for quoting himself—that it is a close paraphrase of the conclusion to an essay Arnold had written the previous year, entitled “On Poetry.” That conclusion begins with this declaration, drawing on his infamous definition from Literature and Dogma (CPW vi; 176): “The reign of religion as morality touched with emotion is indeed indestructible” (CPW ix: 63, emphasis mine, see R.H. Super’s editorial note, ix.314). In that earlier essay, Arnold defines poetry (against science) as that which “thinks emotionally” and explicitly aligns it with religion. Poetry “gives the idea, but gives it touched with beauty, heightened by emotion” (62).

When disciplined by wide reading and having internalized “the best that has been thought and said,” readers would apply the fruits of that interpretive discipline to their reading of the Bible and Christian tradition. They would approach it all as poetry—as words “thrown out at an object of consciousness not fully grasped;”¹² they would easily brush aside the layers of traditional and doctrinal gloss that had accrued to the text, to discover moving expressions of a spiritual experience they would recognize as universal, and as their own.¹³

It was for such an interpretive sensibility that Arnold had argued at length in St. Paul and Protestantism (1869), Literature and Dogma (1870), God and the Bible (1873) and several essays Arnold wrote between 1862 and 1877 as part of a project to preserve and renew that which he felt in Christianity had “eternal truth, inexhaustible value, a boundless future.”¹⁴ When read in the context of this underexamined portion of Arnold’s oeuvre, the famous passage from “The Study of Poetry” appears not as an endorsement of religion’s replacement by literary study, but as the perhaps more startling suggestion that a literary sensibility would be an essential part of the liberal Anglicanism Arnold wanted badly to protect. Arnold, contra Eliot, argued that true religion would be possible only for the person of culture.

This chapter aims to reframe Arnold’s legacy within the field of literary studies by foregrounding his writings on religion, in which Arnold argued for nothing less than a

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¹² CPW vi: 187.
¹³ As John Guillory has written in one of the most sophisticated versions of this replacement narrative, that Arnold believed that “culture”—a wide range of literary experience and the internalization of “the best that has been thought and said”—could be installed “as a sensibility that performs the social function of doxa—producing a state of cultural homogeneity, of unquestioned belief—without ever requiring the ‘imperfect’ supplement of orthodoxy, without specifying directly what these beliefs are.” For Guillory, Arnold exploited the ideological advantage of substituting sensibility for belief: sensibility “is never subject to decay into mere orthodoxy.” Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 138. Guillory errs only in assuming that this constitutes secularization, rather than an interested attempt to shift the foundations of religion.
¹⁴ “Preface to the Popular Edition of Literature and Dogma” [1883]; CPW iv: 146. One notes that three years after writing “The Study of Poetry” Arnold reflected back on his works of biblical and religious criticism as those “most important (If I may say so) and most capable of being useful” (141).
theological revolution that would bring about a vibrant, modern, and united Church of England.\textsuperscript{15} It offers an account of Arnold’s campaign to redefine “true” religion as an interpretive sensibility and evaluates that campaign in light of what Arnold wanted this religion to do personally and politically. In this chapter’s conclusion, I examine the equivocal effects of this redefinition: the rhetorical power of Arnold’s theological project, I argue, was dependent on its polemical opposition to an obstinately naïve biblical literalism that Arnold called “Hebraism.” Out of a diverse assortment of “Nonconforming” minority Protestant denominations, Arnold fashioned a political and theological monolith that not only threatened the future of Christianity by chaining it to the factual truth of scripture, but threatened the political unity of English society by stubbornly refusing the normative terms of liberal welcome that Arnold offered on behalf of the national Church he was also, simultaneously, calling into being.

I argue that Arnold both won and lost the contest for control over the discourse of religion in literary studies. He failed to establish his interpretive sensibility as the normative concept of religion, but in part because his readers grabbed hold of his polemical depiction of religion as propositional belief and forgot its apologetic context. Yet this apparent loss also afforded Arnold’s theological program the significant privilege of being perceived as disinterested or neutral—outside the discourse it had transformed in its own interests. In effect, Arnold’s writings on religion established propositional belief as the “marked” category of religion, while Arnold’s own theology has become an unmarked presence within the discourse of literary criticism.

\textsuperscript{15} I am not the first to argue that Arnold was neither religion’s elegist nor a champion for its supplanting, but a conservative reformer. This chapter builds on the underutilized work of Ruth aprRoberts’ \textit{Arnold and God} (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1983; James C. Livingston’s \textit{Matthew Arnold and Christianity: His Religious Prose Writings} (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1986); and Nathan Scott, Jr.’s “Arnold’s Version of Transcendence—The \textit{Via Poetica},” \textit{Journal of Religion} 59.3 (July 1979): 261-84.
i. Arnold’s First Problem: Achieving a “Palpable Intuition”

So what was Arnold’s theology? What was the new Christianity to be like? Arnold’s answer was both voluminous and vague. A certain conceptual fuzziness was the inevitable result of Arnold’s premise that religion had its roots in an experience that transcended positive, propositional statement. In other words, Arnold’s presentation was largely negative: he primarily defined his idea of the true and enduring Christianity by insisting on its difference from false forms, insisting specifically on its superiority to the theology of his Nonconformist contemporaries, which he found rigid and close-minded. That vagueness was also necessary for strategic reasons, however: Arnold’s expressivist conception of religion caused problems he wanted to obscure—even from himself. To understand what needed to be obscured, we might actually employ Arnold’s own definitional method and proceed through a series of distinctions and contrasts.

Eliot’s misreading of Arnold as an agent of secularization provides a fruitful point of departure, because it points us to the question of the spiritual needs that Arnold hoped his new Christianity would solve. It bears repeating that Eliot’s hostility to Arnold was concentrated in the tender period for 1927-34, a period in which Eliot was working out the relation between his relatively recent religious commitments and his literary criticism and cultural theories, and doing so in a series of polemical essays on figures he admired and with whom he had identified, but from whom he now felt compelled to differentiate himself. Arnold was one of these; I.A. Richards was another. And in the late 1920s, Eliot was reading the former through the latter. In Science and Poetry, Richards used Arnoldian allusions to bookend his own argument that science would eventually destroy the surviving traditions of human meaning-making. The
famous lines from “The Study of Poetry” quoted above serve as the book’s epigraph, and

Richards concluded by reprising what he took to be that essay’s thesis:

It is very probable that the Hindenburg Line to which the defence of our traditions retired
as a result of the onslaughts of the last century will be blown up in the near future. If this
should happen a mental chaos such as man has never experienced may be expected. We
shall then be thrown back, as Matthew Arnold foresaw, upon poetry. It is capable of
saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos.16

In his 1927 review of Richards’ work, Eliot accepted the connection without comment or
complaint: “Mr. Richards thinks that the only thing that can save us from ‘mental chaos’ is
poetry, a poetry of the future detached from all belief,” Eliot wrote. “It is like saying that the
wall-paper will save us when the walls have crumbled. It is a revised version of Literature and
Dogma.”17 Reading Richards as an extension of Arnold, Eliot in turn read Arnold’s religious
writings through Richards’ famous dichotomy between statements and pseudo-statement,
between words used “for the sake of the references they promote,” or “for the sake of the
attitudes and emotions which ensue.”18 As Eliot put it in a biting phrase from the 1930 essay
quoted earlier, Arnold had proposed that one “get all the emotional kick out of Christianity one

17 “Literature, Science, and Dogma: A Review of Science and Poetry, by I.A. Richards,” CPCE iii:
48). In an earlier comment, Eliot had explicitly connected Richards to the secularization story that he read
in Arnold’s “Study of Poetry:” for Richards, “there is now a steady and invincible march of science which
will leave less and less nourishment for poetry.” “A Note on Poetry and Belief,” The Enemy 1 (Jan 1927),
15-17; CPCE iii: 18-21; 19.
18 I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1950),
267. Lionel Trilling came to the same conclusion in Matthew Arnold (New York: Harcourt Brace
Jovanovich, 1954 [1939]). Though Trilling gives Arnold’s religious writings a far more detailed reading
than Eliot, he also understands Arnold through Richards’ dichotomy as making religion simply about
emotion, and as just as engaged in the project of defining religion as Eliot was (and as Arnold was). “We
cannot think modernly in ancient words,” he writes; “we betray either the one time or the other. The act of
translation which Arnold makes the basis of so much of religious activity is an interesting cultural device,
the device of the critic concerned for human continuities. …But still the act of translation and
‘purification’ is anything but a religious act… The emotions which a sensitive non-believer experiences
from a well-sung requiem mass or any other elaborate ritual may have much in common with the
religious emotion; they are clearly not religious” (365).
can, without the bother of believing it.” For Eliot, then, the goal of Arnold’s writings on religion was to preserve the emotional and aesthetic resources of the Christian tradition in the secular age that was already upon him.

This is misleading, if not completely untrue. For Arnold, the end of religion was always joy. His critical prose (and his personal notebooks) are full of scriptural quotations that rejoice in giving thanks and praise. “It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Eternal; it is a good thing to sing praises unto our God!” Framed by Richards’ stark dichotomy, such emotional data appeared to Eliot to trade on the truth-claims to which Arnold, elsewhere, seemed indifferent. Was the God of Israel the creator and redeemer of the world, or not? Yet Arnold’s primary religious concern existed beyond the binary opposition of knowledge and feeling. His primary concern was their synthesis in action: practical action that united knowledge of the right course with authentic desire to follow it. As Arnold defined it most concisely, religion was “morality touched by emotion.” It was a discipline by which one formed and integrated one’s habits and desires into a scheme of truly moral action, in which righteousness was not a matter of rote obedience but an achieved intuition, an authentic longing to act as one’s “best self:” a longing that found satisfaction in the habits of daily life.

Religion, for Arnold, was a means of living more fully and rightly in that “three-fourths of life” that was conduct. (The other one-fourth was culture.) If Arnold’s ideal of culture was

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19 “Arnold and Pater,” CPCE iv: 178. It followed that if one was only interested in emotional or aesthetic effects, one could just as easily get one’s kicks from Milton or Browning or Hardy as from Isaiah, Luke, or Paul.

20 Ruth apRoberts notes that across his life, religious quotations have pride of place in all Arnold’s personal notebooks. “A good proportion of these transcriptions are repeated again and again through the years. They call to mind Arnold’s use of the word dwell when he speaks of the way we use poetry: we dwell on certain texts. One cannot but infer from the Note-Books something like a sustained discipline of spiritual exercises” (104-5).

21 Literature and Dogma, CPW vi: 193. It must be admitted that Arnold repeated these terms until their rhetorical returns were somewhat diminished.

22 ibid, 176.
that people who were free to say what they liked would say something worth saying, Arnold’s ideal of conduct—which religion was supposed to bring about—was that people, free to do as they liked, would do the right thing and do it joyfully. The premise of Arnold’s whole critical oeuvre was that his society fell far short of that ideal. English society needed to develop the sensibility Arnold called culture, in which individuals would continually self-regulate by bringing a “fresh stream of thought” onto their “stock notions and habits” in order to cultivate habits more aligned with their values. Likewise it needed to transform its religious institutions to facilitate this discipline, rather than enforcing increasingly untenable beliefs.

It is ironic and affecting that Eliot was unwilling or unable to see Arnold’s central concern with the reformation of habits. For even as Eliot wrote his most biting criticism of Arnold, he was still struggling to bring his own habitual action into line with the doctrine he had embraced. Eliot believed: right doctrine was central to his understanding of religion, and he affirmed Anglo-Catholic doctrine. Yet he counted himself among those who, in the words of *Ash-Wednesday* “are terrified and cannot surrender” to the life implied by that doctrine. Belief was not a silver bullet: it was only the first step in a far more complicated and humbling conversion of life, and the issue was Eliot’s most basic interpretive habits, his most fundamental forms of engagement with the world, with others, and with himself. As I argue in this dissertation’s final chapter, Eliot’s Arnold-directed ire was wrapped up in his frustration that in

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23 Eliot was more sanguine about Arnold—even sympathetic—ten years earlier, in his Introduction to *The Sacred Wood*: he noted, with justice, that Arnold “was not occupied so much in establishing a criticism as in attacking the uncritical. The difference is that while in constructive work something can be done, destructive work must incessantly be repeated.” But he went on: “Arnold is not to be blamed: he wasted his strength, as men of superior ability sometimes do, because he saw something to be done and no one else to do it. The temptation, to any man who is interested in ideas and primarily in literature, to put literature into a corner until he has cleaned up the whole country first, is almost irresistible.” *CPCE* i; 295. And it is worth noting that just a few years after his criticisms of 1930, Eliot admitted to a desire we may call characteristically Arnoldian: “What I want is a religion which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately, Christian.” “Religion and Literature,” [1934] *CPCE* v: 218-29.
his daily walk of faith he was proving to be more like a critically self-enclosed and proudly skeptical “man of culture” than he wanted to admit.²⁴

Arnold would have understood Eliot’s predicament all too well. In 1849 he had written in exasperation to Clough of feeling “faussé,” and that he was “more snuffing after a moral atmosphere to respire in than ever before.” For as he confessed,

“I have never yet succeeded in any one great occasion in consciously mastering myself: I can go thro: the imaginary process of mastering myself and see the whole affair as it would then stand, but at the critical point I am too apt to hoist up the mainsail to the wind and let her drive. However as I get more awake to this it will I hope mend for I find that with me a clear almost palpable intuition (damn the logical sense of the word) is necessary before I get into prayer: unlike many people who set to work at their duty self-denial, etc. like furies in the dark hoping to be gradually illuminated as they persist in this course.”²⁵

It is an affecting disclosure, giving illuminating context to Arnold’s scorn for the blindered moral workaholism that Arnold would call “Hebraism” almost twenty years later: he was, in part, jealous. At least those “furies in the dark” had gotten a move on. Arnold describes himself, in contrast, as trapped in self-defeating spiritual stasis. As J. Hillis Miller observes in his reading of this passage, Arnold can intellectually understand the process of discipline by which he might bring his desire into line with his understanding of right action: such “conscious mastering,” such formation of desire, he senses, is work often done by prayer. But he demands “clear almost palpable intuition” that would kickstart the process of formation: he has to already want that

²⁴ We may say here, however, that Eliot was not disinterested in his assessment of Arnold’s religious writings: this is not a criticism, but rather an invitation to reframe this episode in the historiography of literary criticism, which might otherwise be seen as a dispute between a progressive, secular Arnold and a reactionary, religious Eliot, as in fact centering on a dispute between two opposing—but equally religious—visions of discipline. Though he did not address Arnold in such terms, it is notable that Eliot did see Arnold’s New Humanist heirs as part of the obscured inheritance of liberal Protestantism (and all the more powerful because obscured). Attacking his former teacher, the humanist Irving Babbitt, Eliot wrote that Babbitt’s pretension to a universal vantage from which to judge all other positive faiths was “alarmingly like very liberal Protestant theology of the nineteenth century: it is, in fact, a product—a by-product—of Protestant theology in its last agonies.” “The Humanism of Irving Babbitt,” first published in Forum 80 (July 1928), and also in Selected Essays; CPCE iii: 454-61; 457.

which he knows to be right (for he can imagine the process right up to the end, seeing “the affair as it would then stand) before he is willing to act. He will not begin the process of discipline unless he has already achieved the state in which such discipline would be superfluous. He cannot pray unless the function of prayer—the formation of desire—has already been fulfilled. “So he remains withdrawn from life,” Miller concludes, “the disinterested critic of the institutions, the literature, the society, the religion of his time….as something he has experienced from the inside, but as a spectacle to be regarded from a distance with a settled suspicion that the truth is not in them.”26

This is an elegant diagnosis of the spiritual slackness to which Arnold confessed in 1849, and it is indeed the crux around which Arnold’s critical prose would revolve—and never resolve. The desire for discipline, the desire for an integration of knowledge and will: these desires never went away. They were, as we shall see, displaced. Here it is important to say only that Miller was wrong to view this critical opposition to religion as a sign that Arnold had resigned himself to religion’s impossibility. In point of fact, it prepared Arnold to embrace and evangelize for a Protestant modernism in which truly religious persons maintain a critical—even polemical—relationship to the religious tradition in which they live. Arnold’s distanced and purportedly disinterested criticism of contemporary religion was the definitive practice of Christianity as Arnold came to understand it.

ii. Arnold’s Second Problem: What is the new Christianity to be like?

Arnold first dipped his toes into religious questions in 1862, with a scathing review of Bishop John William Colenso’s *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined*.

26 I am indebted to Miller’s elegant reading of this passage and his sense of Arnold’s “spiritual slackness” (242ff; this passage is on 243).
Colenso, the Anglican Bishop in the South African province of Natal, had undertaken a translation of the English Bible into Zulu and, in the process, discovered a number of inconsistencies and contradictions in the original text. Having built his faith on the authority of a literally inspired Bible, he was deeply shaken by the experience, but felt duty-bound to publish his findings, which added to the public conflagration attending the issue of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, in which seven authors argued for a critical inquiry into the historical and cultural situation of scripture’s authorship: the Bible should be read “like any other book,” as Benjamin Jowett wrote in the flagship essay.  

*Essays and Reviews* marked the late arrival of the German higher criticism into the British popular consciousness. Colenso, however, was completely ignorant of that historical-critical tradition: he pedantically listed the inconsistencies and impossibilities he had discovered, expecting the world to be shaken along with him.

Arnold, himself long familiar with German scholarship, wanted more. “*What then?*” he demanded. For Arnold, Colenso’s niggling catalogue of contradictions never led to an honest confrontation with the crucial question those contradictions raised, the question that would concern Arnold for the next thirty years: “*What is the new Christianity to be like?*”

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27 “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” *Essays and Reviews*, (London: John W. Parker and Son, West Strand, 1860), 338. Benjamin Jowett was Arnold’s teacher at Balliol and fellow member of The Decade, a small intellectual club that also included John Duke Coleridge, J.C. Shairp, W.C. Lake, James Riddell, Arthur Stanley, R.W. Church, and Frederick Temple. Jowett’s essay includes a number of hermeneutic reflections that suggest he may have been familiar with Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, ranging from his impatience with the corrupted nature of New Testament Greek (Jowett too was a prominent classicist and translator) to his basic interpretive principle: “Scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had to the mind of the prophet or evangelist who first uttered or wrote, to the hearers or readers who first received it” (378). Compare Schleiermacher’s suggestion that the reader of scripture “must establish the same relationship between oneself and the author as between him and his original addressees.” *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. and ed. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27.

28 “The Bishop and the Philosopher,” *CPW* iii: 49, first emphasis original, second emphasis mine. This essay and a later reworking entitled “Spinoza and the Bible” were important precursors to “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” In defending his intervention in the theological debate stirred up by Colenso’s work, Arnold worked out his new conception of literary criticism as a form of guardianship over “the general culture of single nations or of the world at large.” All scholarly books
was not a divinely inspired document, how ought one read it instead? To contrast Colenso with a thinker who had actually grappled with this problem, Arnold turned his review to the first English translation of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.29

In the *Tractatus*, originally published in 1670, Spinoza had argued that the Bible be read as a collection of texts that were human, historical, and in every way fallible.30 Yet these fallible texts evidently contained a transcendent truth. The primary task of biblical hermeneutics was then to draw a distinction between words of men and the Word of God—between the “merely human” and the revelation of a “true religion” unadulterated by human expression. The books of the Bible had been written by specific individuals according to their time and individual temperaments, he wrote, and their meaning must be sought in history—except for “those passages which speak of true religion and true virtue.”31 True religion was revealed in the statement of a “universal divine law,” a moral and philosophical absolute that commanded obedient devotion to God and charity to one’s neighbor. The erroneous text of the Bible contained this Word of God, which alone “has come down to us uncorrupted, even though the words in which it was first expressed are deemed to have been frequently altered.”32 As Arnold would do later, Spinoza stressed the ease of this interpretive process: “We see from Scripture

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29 As R.H. Super notes, Arnold was reading Spinoza as early as 1850, if not earlier, and finding in his thought the “positive and vivifying atmosphere” that was, for Arnold, the fruit of good criticism (and perhaps the real contrast to Colenso’s stultifying volume). Letter to Clough, 23 October 1850 in Lowry, 116-17; cited in Super’s editorial note, *CPW* iii: 415.
31 *TTP* xii. 9: 168.
32 *TTP* xii.10: 170. Richard Popkin has argued that this, even more than the push for historicism, was Spinoza’s radical leap: to imagine the Word of God as separable from (and merely contained in) the scriptural text. “Spinoza and Bible Scholarship,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 383-404.
itself, and without any difficulty or ambiguity, that the essence of the Law is to love God above all things and one’s neighbor as oneself.”

Arnold was deeply impressed by Spinoza, and yet diverged from him in illuminating ways. (Here we continue our approach to Arnold’s own ideas about the “new Christianity” by negation and contrast.) Spinoza identified a clear locus of interpretive authority in individual reason. Invoking the same passage in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians that would later be so important to Schleiermacher, Spinoza held that God had instituted a new relationship with humanity in and through Christ: Christ had made a new covenant with humanity that superseded the “old” Mosaic covenant—the Ten Commandments and, by extension, the whole of the Jewish Law. Under the new Christian covenant, readers could loosen their grip on the literal words of scripture, because they had “a letter from God written not in ink but by the spirit of God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, on the heart.”

Even the skeptical reader of the Bible would ultimately recognize the “universal law” encoded in the twofold commandment, because that law was the condition of possibility for their own thought: “God’s eternal word and covenant and true religion are divinely inscribed upon the hearts of men, that is, upon the human heart.”

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33 TTP xii.10: 170.
34 TTP xii.6: 166. The quotation is from 2 Corinthians 3:3. The scholarship on Spinoza’s relationship to Judaism ancient and contemporary is vast, and it exceeds the scope of this chapter to offer a full account of that discourse. It is to be stressed, however, Spinoza’s Tractatus was a complex rhetorical triangulation that used a biblical exegesis to advance an argument about biblical interpretation, republican freedom of conscience, and the location of religious authority in 17th century Holland. Like Arnold, Spinoza sought to ground his revolutionary biblical hermeneutics in a biblical exegesis; he advocated for a radical shift in interpretive authority while presenting that shift as deeply continuous with the Christian tradition prized by those he sought to persuade. His vituperative statements about the Jews within the Tractatus must be weighed in light of these rhetorical aims. I am indebted to Shira Billet for graciously alerting me to this long and important debate in Spinoza studies, and for her patient explanation of its stakes. In a future iteration of this chapter, I would like to expand on the historiography of the historical-critical method and the pride of place given to Spinoza, perhaps as a way of “neutralizing” the anti-Judaic or anti-Semitic ideas of its Christian practitioners by attributing them, first, to a Jew. See Jon D. Levenson, “Theological Consensus or Historicist Evasion? Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies,” Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? eds. Roger Brooks and John J. Collins (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 109-45.
mind.”35 One could easily discriminate “true religion” from the erroneous and historically particular human text because its precepts “are also the precepts of the universal divine law written in our hearts; and its is only by this that the divinity of Scripture is established;—by its containing, namely, precepts identical with those of this inly-written and self-proving law.”36

After writing Culture and Anarchy, Arnold took up biblical criticism in earnest, one could say with a sense of vocation. A change came over Arnold in 1868 after losing his infant son Basil and his eldest son Tommy in quick succession.37 Their losses, combined with Arnold’s arrival at the age at which his own father had died of an inherited heart condition, led to “several awakenings and epoch-making things,” as he wrote to his mother. It all pointed “to a new beginning, yet it may well be that I am near my end, as papa was at my age, …and that there will be little time to carry far the new beginning. But that is all the more reason for carrying it as far as one can, while one lives.”38 In his own way and on his own terms, he would continue the work

35 TTP xii.1: 162.
36 “Spinoza and the Bible,” CPW iii: 166. Self-proving, indeed: Spinoza had described a circular process by which the “inly-written” law was both the premise and the product of scriptural interpretation. God had inscribed an interpretive key onto the very mind of the reader, by which the true message of scripture could be discerned “from Scripture itself, and without any difficulty or ambiguity” (TTP xii.10: 170). Yet the interpretive desideratum—the true and uncorrupted message of the Bible, the religion “which is universal or common to the whole human race”—was itself the statement of this law. A skeptic might suggest that if a reader were not aware of this interior law beforehand, scripture’s true meaning would be impenetrable; if a reader were aware of it, a reading of scripture would be superfluous.
37 See Park Honan, Matthew Arnold: A Life (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), esp. chapter 15. Honan notes that Arnold first turned to Marcus Aurelius after Tommy’s death, but then gave up a planned project to make the early Greek poets as popular in England as the Bible in order to begin “the boldest work of his life in bringing the methods of literary criticism to bear on the Bible” (356-7).
38 The Letters of Matthew Arnold, vol. iii (1866-1870), ed. Cecil Y. Lang (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1996), 305-6. Hereafter Letters, with volume and page number. The letter is dated 24 December: 1868, Arnold’s birthday. Arnold goes on to note the readings he did as part of the daily office on the anniversary of his father’s death (the first chapter of Isaiah) and the lectionary texts for the following Sunday: Romans 13:13 and the collect for the first Sunday of Advent. Both of these texts center on the theme—to adopt Arnold’s own language—of casting aside the desires of the “ordinary self” and putting on the “best self.” The passage from Romans, which, as Arnold notes, was “the passage that converted St Augustine,” concludes: “Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.” The collect begins “Almighty God, give us
of his father to broaden the Anglican establishment and so to safeguard it for coming generations. Arnold may not have been unable to summon the “duty, self-denial, etc.” to pray in 1849, but in 1868 he summoned the will to carry on his father’s legacy and to defend the religion that had offered him some consolation in the loss of the children he loved so dearly.\textsuperscript{39}

Arnold’s biblical criticism followed what he understood to be the fundamental premise of Spinoza’s: that “the religion of all the great churches of Christendom is a religion which is not that of the Bible; it is a huge gloss put upon the Bible by generations of metaphysical theologians; the Bible, honestly and intelligently read, gives us a religion quite different and far simpler.”\textsuperscript{40} Yet Arnold himself did not believe in the \textit{innate} capacity of the individual to rationally recognize this simpler religion that remained vital, though obscured, under the “huge gloss” of theology and tradition. Spinoza had identified a faculty of pure reason divinely inscribed on the human mind. Arnold, in contrast, conceived of the subject in Romantic terms, as the product of an ongoing process of organic growth (perhaps even \textit{as} that process itself). The subject’s formation was continuous, a never-ending pursuit of “perfection” or, as Arnold

- grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility.” This is to say that Arnold’s engagement with scripture, which can appear abstracted and bloodless in his criticism, was also deeply charged with personal meaning.

\textsuperscript{39} Arnold may have boasted of his poor chapel attendance during his dandiacal student days at Oxford, but as a family man he found spiritual nourishment in daily morning prayers and Bible reading, regular attendance at Sunday worship (preferring the communion service), and the reading of sermons aloud to his wife and children on Sunday evenings (Livingston, 186). For Arnold’s sense of his father’s social mission, see also “Rugby Chapel,” his elegy for his father, in which what distinguishes Dr. Arnold is not his personal rectitude, but his concern for the salvation of the whole community: “But thou wouldst not alone / Be saved, my father! alone / Conquer and come to thy goal, / Leaving the rest in the wild.” \textit{The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold}, 290.

\textsuperscript{40} This is a quote from the 1862 translation by Robert Willis published by Trübner & Co (without Willis’ name attached); Arnold cites it in a separate review of Spinoza’s \textit{Tractatus} published in the \textit{London Review} (27 December, 1862) while “The Bishop and the Philosopher” was in press, (\textit{CPW} iii: 57).
elsewhere put it, an abstracted “best self.” As a result, he hesitated to vest full interpretive authority in the mind of the individual reader. After all, the entire premise of Arnold’s critical project was that most of his contemporaries had not taken up the pursuit of perfection; they relied rather upon their own naïve and reductive view of the world, and were increasingly willing to impose that vision upon others. Arnold called that “anarchy.” Arnold, in short, did not want his own readers to make a habit of weighing a biblical passage against their own individual reason alone. The new Christianity would not, then, appeal to an authoritative, “inly-written law.”

But it would also not appeal to the authority of tradition. That had been Cardinal Newman’s solution. Arnold admired Newman for his urbane style, as he admired the Oxford Movement as a whole for its conservation of Christian history and its attention to the formative power of aesthetics in worship: it was a protest of beauty and sophisticated sweetness against the hard and thin ritual of Nonconformity. He was unmoved, however, by Newman’s appeal to the apostolic authority of the church in matters of scriptural interpretation. As we have seen, Arnold was a defender of the Church of England as a vehicle for common worship, but he understood it as more a vessel for theological disputes rather than the authority to adjudicate them. In Newman’s pliant and sophisticated thinking, human knowledge of God develops organically through time: the authoritative meaning of scripture is that which it has come to mean for the church, at this time. Arnold certainly believed that history had a tendency, a “natural current” being continually worked out, but the field of that development was not the church. “Thought and knowledge…is eminently something individual, and of our own; the more we possess it as

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41 For Arnold’s debt to the German Romantics and their idea of bildung, see Lionel Gossman, “Philhellenism and Antisemitism: Matthew Arnold and his German Models,” Comparative Literature 46.1 (Winter 1994), 1-39.
42 CPW v: 115-36.
strictly of our own, the more power it has on us."44 In other words, Arnold rejected Newman’s updated doctrine of “implicit faith” in the church, replacing it with an implicit faith in critical discourse—we might say “criticism” in its function as the concern for “general culture”—as that which will produce truths worth applying and the will to apply them. Arnold placed his trust in the progressive enlightenment of individuals and their increasingly rational self-organization, in the faith that “true consensus can only be produced through discursive freedom.”45

But neither did Arnold really want his readers to focus on building up the knowledge and skills upon which modern biblical criticism had been founded. As the son of Thomas Arnold, student of Coleridge and Schleiermacher, Arnold took the basic insights of historical-critical scholarship for granted, and he saw himself as heir to their work.46 But the new Christianity would not be an academic enterprise. Arnold was often dismissive of the philological and historical work that sought to discover what a particular scriptural passage would have meant to its original audience.47 He admired the methods of German scholars, but “in quickness and

46 In a letter to his mother, remarkable not only for its pathos but for Arnold’s ambivalence about his father’s anti-Semitism (to which I return below), Arnold wrote: “Bunsen used to say that our great business was to get rid of all that was purely Semitic in Christianity, and to make it Indo-germanic; and Schleiermacher, that in the Christianity of us western nations there was really much more of Plato and Socrates than of the wild Bedouins with Joshua & David—and on the whole, Papa worked in the direction of these ideas of Bunsen and Schleiermacher, and was, perhaps, the only powerful Englishman of his day who did so. In fact he was the only deeply religious man who had the necessary culture for it. Then, I never touch on considerations about the State without feeling myself on his ground. At this time of year, and with my birthday reminding me how much of my term is spent, I like to bring before my mind the course and scope of his labours, and to try and connect my own with them. Perhaps, the change of times and modes of action being allowed for, my scope is not so different from his as you and others think.” To Mary Penrose Arnold, Christmas Day, 1867, Letters iii: 207.
47 This involved an implicit criticism of his teacher Jowett and his scholarly presupposition that “Scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had to the mind of the prophet or evangelist who first uttered or wrote, to the hearers or readers who first received it.” “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” 378.
delicacy of perception they do seem to come short."\textsuperscript{48} They lacked a sense of the whole.

(Likewise, Arnold was little impressed with Jowett’s “On the Interpretation of Scripture.”\textsuperscript{49}

Arnold appeared bored by it: of course the Bible was a human document, written in history.

What mattered to Arnold was how it would be read and applied by the English middle-class.)

Without appeal to the authority of the text as divinely inspired, without appeal to an inly-written law, to a growing and yet authoritative apostolic tradition, or to historicist methods that would open up a passage’s original meaning, to what would a Bible-reader turn? Arnold’s broad answer was “the old remedy of culture—knowing the best that has been thought and known in the world.”\textsuperscript{50} Again, it must be kept in mind that culture referred not so much to a canon of works, ideas, and values, as to the sensibility by which a person would be able to recognize the obvious and natural superiority of those values and ideas. That standard would then be critically applied to all facets of experience—all “stock notions and habits”—in the pursuit of a more creative and authentic existence. It is in this sense that culture “turns out to be, in another shape, and in particular relation to the Bible: getting the power, through reading, to estimate the proportion and relation in what we read.”\textsuperscript{51}

This is what I meant earlier when I wrote that religion would be possible only for the person of culture. Without this culture, “the man of no range in his reading” who knows only his Bible would inevitably misunderstand it: he would lose its redemptive message of peace and joy amidst the countless passages which revealed only the narrow knowledge of its original human author, but which he would mistake as the absolute dictates of the divine. He would read the

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Literature and Dogma}; \textit{CPW} vi: 157.
\textsuperscript{49} Arnold wrote that its ideas “are neither milk for babes nor strong meat for men; the weak among his readers will be troubled by them; the strong would be more informed by seeing them handled as acquired elements for further speculation by freer exponents of the speculative thought of Europe, than be seeing them hesitatingly exhibited as novelties.” “The Bishop and the Philosopher,” \textit{CPW} iii: 53-4.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{CPW} vi: 153.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{CPW} vi: 153, emphasis original.
Bible as the self-authorizing Word of God, legitimized by the authors’ claim to have been divinely inspired: he would read literally, and understand every verse to be of nominally equal value to the Psalms or the Sermon on the Mount; such a reader “must be inclined to treat it all alike, and to press every word.” The figure explicitly evokes the tactile: through literary experience, however, this reader would learn “what ought to be pressed and what not.” Modern Christians needed “the tact which surely letters, alone, can give.”

In arguing for the centrality of tactful judgment in the new Christianity Arnold was also implicitly establishing a new form of religious authority that would supervene all the others he found partial and wanting. For who would model and authorize the proper working of tactful reading? Who would administer its instruction to the broader society? The literary critic. Ideally, such a critic would establish and oversee the pedagogy of this sensibility in a universal system of public education, in order to ensure that the rising generations of middle and eventually working-class children would cultivate their own critical judgment and thus easily identify the “natural truth” of the Bible above the literal level of literal application and scientific falsification. In other words, this new religious authority would look very much like Matthew Arnold.

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In arrogating this authority to literary and cultural critics like himself, however, Arnold implicitly presented himself as acting humbly in imitation of Christ. Arnold portrayed this significant shift in the site of religious authority as a conservative move, as a return to the practice of Jesus. As Nathan Scott has noted, despite his consistent polemic against “most of what passes with us for religion” in his day, Arnold understood that any theological reconstruction of Christianity would necessarily “claim an essential continuity between its own

52 CPW vi: 152-3.
53 CPW vi: 196.
forms and those of the original Christian witness, if, Christianly speaking, it [were] to carry any force.”

54 Literature and Dogma was Arnold’s most comprehensive treatment of that “original Christian witness.” It was there that Arnold made his case that Jesus’ salvific intervention was a function of neither his incarnation nor his atoning sacrifice, but of his teaching and the sensibility that he modeled for his followers. Literature and Dogma was also, as Ruth apRoberts has observed, Arnold’s most systematic work of literary criticism. 55 And it is there, I argue, that we get Arnold’s most specific account of his critical sensibility in its ideal operation: as it was practiced by none other than Jesus himself. For in Arnold’s biblical exegesis, Jesus’ mission was to restore his fellow Jews to the original intuition expressed by their canonical poets, whose writings they had literalized into a calcified code. Jesus, in other words, was a critic—the exemplary literary critic.

Following Lowth and Herder, Arnold praised the ancient Hebrews for the language with which they rendered the affective power of this primary experience. 56 In contrast to the systematizing theologies of the modern West, attempting to force the biblical witness into scientific statement, this “primitive” nation provided an ideal of affective receptivity and richly

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55 apRoberts, vii.

56 The first statement of the Bible’s value as poetry dates to Bishop Robert Lowth’s 1753 Oxford Lecture series On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews. Lowth first drew attention to the play of formal patterning in the Hebrew Bible (such as parallelism in the Psalms); he saw literary form and revealed truth as inextricably entwined in the biblical text. Herder took up a version of Lowth’s claim as a way to pry form and content apart. Despite his praise for the union of form and feeling in Hebrew poetry, Herder continually refers to form as the “clothing” of the idea, and privileges moments in the scriptures when no idea is communicated, thus the preponderance of Job: “There is...a form without form, silence, and yet a voice, and after all the powerful effect alone indicates the formless figure, and so it must be...Form and definiteness are incompatible with our notions of spirit: it is the offspring of the wind, and must preserve the character of its origin.” The Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews, trans. James Marsh (Burlington, VT: Edward Smith, 1833 [1782]) 67.
imaginative, poetic expression.\textsuperscript{57} Israel “inferred nothing, reasoned out nothing; he felt and experienced.”\textsuperscript{58} Within this Orientalist frame, such praise presumed blame: in Arnold’s telling, the authors of the Hebrew Bible did not attempt a more scientific or systematic statement of God’s being in part because they were incapable of such feats of abstraction. And to Arnold’s satisfaction, they knew the limitations of their race and did not attempt it. The Hebrews never lost sight of the imaginative nature of their speech: “Israel, knew what we, who have developed our idea from his words about it, so often are ignorant of: that his words were but thrown out at a vast object of consciousness, which he could not fully grasp.”\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{57} “The spirit and tongue of Israel kept a propriety, a reserve, a sense of the inadequacy of language in conveying man’s ideas of God, which contrast strongly with the licence of affirmation in our Western theology” (\textit{CPW} vi: 187).

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{CPW} vi: 184. As Herder did before him, Arnold saw the religious talent of the Hebrew people to be a positive outlier in his mostly negative assessment of their racialized character: “In spite of all which in them and in their character is unattractive, nay, repellent,—in spite of their shortcomings even in righteousness itself and their insignificance in everything else,—this petty, unsuccessful, unamiable people, without politics, without science, without art, without charm, deserve their great place in the world’s regard, and are likely to have it more, as the world goes on, rather than less” (\textit{CPW} vi: 199). This tension persists throughout Arnold’s work: the poetry of ancient Israel would again be a source of inspiration in a future of which the Jews, as a people, were unworthy.

As to the question of Arnold’s anti-Semitism, Vincent Pecora in \textit{Secularization and Cultural Criticism} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) notes that Arnold took pains to distance himself from contemporary ideas of Aryan supremacy, and a corresponding Christology in which Jesus divested himself of his Jewish nature and took on a cloak of Aryan glory: he openly mocked this idea as presented by Eugène Burnof (\textit{La Science des Religions} [Paris, 1872]): Arnold faulted the “Aryan genius…for making religion a metaphysical conception” (\textit{CPW} vi: 341); his own allegiance was very much with the Hebrew poets. Pecora relies on Lionel Gossman’s “Philhellenism and Antisemitism: Matthew Arnold and His German Models,” \textit{Comparative Literature} 46.1 (Winter 1994), 1-39. Gossman argues that Arnold was less anti-Semitic than most of Germans from whom he drew his thinking about \textit{bildung}, and notes that, in practice, his support of Jews in his own society was relatively solid (33ff).

On the other hand, Arnold obviously and deplorably gave credence to essentialized conceptions of the Jews as it served his own theology and argument (154). For the purposes of this chapter, the most important aspect of his racial theory was Arnold’s sense that both the intuitive spontaneity of the Hebrews and the metaphysical systematizing of the Aryans (or Greeks) were to be united and their differences in some way transcended. Arnold, it might be said, desired a “post-racial” faith—but, as I argue at the end of the chapter, his image of “universality” was one which defined itself against an inassimilable and unredeemable particularity: that which refused Arnold’s “post-racial” universal was, ironically, troped by race—as “Hebraism.”

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{CPW} vi: 187-8.
Then, a fall: Arnold was one of many 18th and 19th century biblical critics who reinforced the traditional narrative of the Christian supersession over Judaism by idealizing the early period of lively and spontaneous religiosity and then lamenting its reduction to a vacuous sacerdotalism by the time of Jesus’ birth. (Arnold implicitly marks the difference between the praiseworthy early community and its later corruption by calling the former “Israel” and its members “Hebrews;” the latter he refers to as the Jewish nation and “the Jews.”) The Jews lost the “nearness and clearness” of that primary intuition—as intuition—and began to believe their God to truly be “a mere magnified and non-natural man, like the God of our popular religion now, who has commanded certain courses of conduct and attached certain sanctions to them.”

Drawing on Goethe, Arnold called this the Aberglaube: the “extra-belief.” The Jews “found themselves taking ‘meats and drinks and divers washings’ for judgment; taking for righteousness ‘gifts and sacrifices…tithing mint, anise and cumin.” The authentic personal encounter with the divine had been replaced by a sacrificial economics in which sanctity could be purchased by pro forma obedience to a legalistic code and the expectation of a political messiah. By the time of Jesus’ ministry, Judaism had become a “mere matter of blind rule…only ceremony.” God’s chosen people, Arnold wrote, were by then to “evil disposed, and not at all blessed.”

This was the situation that Jesus addressed, the world he came to redeem. The parallels to Arnold’s own polemic against his Nonconforming contemporaries are obvious: it is thus unsurprising that Arnold’s biblical exegesis generated a Jesus who exemplified the

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60 Jon Levenson has called this the “degenerative model of ancient Israelite history.” “Theological Consensus or Historicist Evasion? Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies,” 123.

61 CPW vi: 215.

62 Arnold’s love for the evocative poetic language of the Hebrews did not prevent him from making drastic editorial changes according to his own taste and purposes. Arnold was moved to replace the Hebrew word for God (as Arnold understood it, “Jehovah”) with a phrase that would both thunder more impressively on his own ears and be more appropriately vague: the Eternal that makes for righteousness.

63 CPW vi: 219.

64 CPW vi: 288.
characteristics that Arnold believed would restore and protect religion in his own century. Jesus, in other words, was the quintessentially tactful reader. As Arnold attempted in his own time, Jesus offered a new interpretation of the Jewish law and modeled an authentic life inside that tradition, restoring contact with its spiritual source.

While the Old Testament says: *Attend to conduct!* the New Testament says: *Attend to the feelings and dispositions whence conduct proceeds!* And as attending to conduct had very much degenerated into deadness and formality, attending to the *springs* of conduct was a revelation, a revival of intuitive and fresh perceptions, a touching of morals with emotion, a discovering of religion, similar to that which had been effected when Israel, struck with the abiding power not of man’s causing which makes for righteousness, and filled with joy and awe by it, had in the old days named God the *Eternal*. Man came under a new dispensation, and made with God a second covenant.\(^\text{65}\)

Arnold’s use of the supersession narrative is thus complex: the new dispensation represents a return to the “intuitive and fresh perceptions” of the former. Jesus Christ contributes no new content to the scriptural record. He himself is not a radically new revelation of God made flesh; he does not give a new and authoritative ethical commandment to love one another as he shows his love for humankind in a tortuous death. Jesus does not make Judaism obsolete.\(^\text{66}\) Instead, he establishes a new interpretive relationship to the Law as a poetic expression of God’s felt presence and promise: Jesus brings an interpretive sensibility that promises to unite right action again to joy and awe, to reveal “the feelings and dispositions whence conduct proceeds.” In other words, Arnold suggests that this new sensibility would cure the spiritual slackness that he confessed to Clough in 1849.

Arnold’s description of this sensibility in *Literature and Dogma* is sometimes confounding in its slipperiness. Yet nowhere else—not in “The Function of Criticism” nor even

\(^\text{65}\) *CPW* vi: 221.

\(^\text{66}\) Trilling writes that Arnold’s theology is “momentous in denying almost completely the centuries of Christian intellectual tradition, from Augustine to Aquinas and beyond. He goes back of all Christianity, for his theology, to the God of the Old Testament Jews” (356).
in the latter part of “The Study of Poetry, where he lays out his theory of touchstones—does Arnold describe in greater detail his the habits and dispositions that comprise his hermeneutic ideal. That ideal was constituted by “a method of inwardness,” a secret of self-renouncement” and, as Arnold never tired of stressing, “that temper of mildness and sweetness in which both of these worked.”

The “method” of Christ was an intuitive hermeneutic by which the previously opaque surface of the literal text (as “blind rule”) became transparent to the reader and its inner meaning became immediately available: it “flashed” upon him. Jesus’ teaching was neither a rejection of the Jewish Law nor a supplement to it, but was itself a hermeneutic that allowed his disciples to take the Law’s commandments on their “inward side.” As Jesus rebuked the “blind Pharisee” in Matthew xxiii to “clean first the inside of the cup, that the outside may be clean also,” he invited his followers to intuit the spirit of the Law’s commandments and to follow them earnestly in that spirit.

He put things in such a way that his hearer was led to take each rule or fact of conduct by its inward side, its effect on the heart and character; then the reason of the thing, the meaning of what had been mere matter of blind rule, flashed upon him. The hearer could distinguish between what was only ceremony, and what was conduct; and the hardest rule of conduct came to appear to him infinitely reasonable and natural, and therefore infinitely prepossessing.

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67 Arnold’s references to Christ’s teachings are highly selective and his selection itself indicates his interest in Jesus as a “conservative reformer,” to invoke Nathan Scott. He makes no mention whatsoever of the Christ’s declarations about himself in John’s Gospel (“I am the way, the truth, and the life,” etc.); he largely excludes even the parables and the Sermon on the Mount. His Jesus is one of exhortations to humility and inwardness, paradigmatically, “The Kingdom of God is within you!” The selection indicates Arnold’s investment in making modern Christianity a matter of disposition rather than of propositional belief; perhaps Arnold hoped that his literalist contemporaries, moved by his exegesis, would forget about the statements about God the Bible records from Christ’s own lips.

68 The dichotomy of the spirit/letter is difficult to avoid here, which however, perhaps only underscores the ubiquity of the Pauline discourse.

69 CPW vi: 219.
Note that this manner of handling scripture ascribes special formative power to its interpretive results: as merely outward “ceremony,” obedience to the rule had been a hard burden; when “the reason of the thing” was made clear, however, one not only recognized it as “infinitely reasonable and natural,” but, more importantly, was moved by desire to live it out. By this method, Jesus “put his disciples in the way of sifting and scrutinising” the Jewish Law, “and of trying by the standard of conformity to conscience.” Was the commandment “only ceremony?” Or did it concern the truly spiritually significant stuff of daily life? In the former case, it could be cheerfully disregarded; in the latter, Arnold suggests that it would be easy and natural to live in accordance with rules that had survived their encounter with the critical intelligence.

Arnold does not specify how this spontaneous alignment of understanding and desire would work; he simply asserts that it did work for Jesus’ disciples, and could again for contemporary readers. It appears for a moment that Arnold had found in the “method” a solution to the problem that plagued him in 1849: his need for a “clear almost palpable intuition” that a spiritual discipline like prayer would lead him in the right direction before he was willing to fully commit to it. With this method, Arnold seems to say, all uncertainty is erased: having established contact with the original intention of a scriptural passage, the full affective power of the passage would flash upon the reader and make the commandment “infinitely prepossessing.”

Yet Arnold promptly muddies these waters further. For Arnold then turns to what he means by the “conscience” by which Christ’s disciples—then and now—were to sift and scrutinize the Law. Recall that Arnold’s conscience, unlike Spinoza’s, does not exist within the private mind; it is not written on the tablet of the heart. In fact it is precisely the pretension to individual authority that must be renounced in order to achieve a reliable conscience. And this is Jesus’ “secret”: self-renunciation, the disowning of the will of the “lower and transient self.”

70 CPW vi: 293.
(Arnold had called it the “ordinary self” in *Culture and Anarchy*.) The individual was to let go of all personality and prejudice and surrender to

*life* properly so called, full of light, endurance, felicity, in connexion with the higher and permanent self…[This] kind of life was already a cherished ideal with Israel (‘Thou wilt show me the path of life!’ [Ps. xvi. 11]); and a man might be placed in it, Jesus said, by dying to the [lower self]. For it is to be noted that our common expression, ‘deny himself,’ is an inadequate and misleading version of these words used by Jesus. To deny one’s self is commonly understood to mean that one refuses one’s self something. But what Jesus says is: ‘Let a man *disown* himself, *renounce* himself, die as regards his old self, and so live.’

Recall that what Arnold meant by “conscience” was not solid, not “self-proving,” as Spinoza has argued it was. It describes a connection to a transcendent authority beyond the self, which Arnold calls “the law of our being.” What makes this particularly muddy is that Arnold refuses to state propositionally what that standard is.

[T]he law of our being is *not* something which is already definitively known and can be exhibited as part of a speculative theory of the system of things; it is something which discovers itself and becomes, as we follow (among other things) the rule of renouncement. What we can say with most certainty about the law of our being is, that we find the rule of renouncement practically leads up to it.

For those who have not already achieved it, the law of our being can only be understood negatively, as that which transcends the ordinary self with its private interests and personal prejudices.

Before turning to the all-important temper of “mildness and sweetness” which Jesus modeled and taught, I want to pause to note that the method and the secret do not fit together in

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71 “What we seek is the Philistine’s perfection, the development of his best self, not mere liberty for his ordinary self. And we no more allow absolute validity to his stock maxim, *Liberty is the law of human life*, than we allow it to the opposite maxim, which is just as true, *Renouncement is the law of human life*. For we know that the only perfect freedom is, as our religion says, a service; not a service to any stock maxim, but an elevation of our best self, and a harmonising in subordination to this, and to the idea of a perfected humanity, all the multitudinous, turbulent, and blind impulses of our ordinary selves.” *CPW* vi: 207.

72 *CPW* vi: 292-3.

73 *CPW* vi: 296.
the way that Arnold claims. Arnold initially asserts a straightforward linear sequence: the method gave the disciple of Jesus “the way to find what righteousness was;” the secret “put the disciple in the way of doing it.” But what Arnold actually describes is not a linear relationship but a circular one. Without the method, one would never grasp the inherently prepossessing invitation to such righteous conduct as would constitute the higher life. Yet without having already achieved that higher life, one would have no reliable interpretive criterion—no “conscience”—with which to sift and scrutinize the text for such inviting commands. Even if one were to assume the most generous position and take Arnold to be describing a nourishing dialectic between the fruits of biblical interpretation and the developing ideal of Christian subjectivity, Arnold’s refusal to give any positive terms to the “law of our being” means that one would have to already know (at least intuitively or provisionally) what would constitute that interpretive criteria in order to enter into that dialectic.

If this self-defeating cycle feels familiar, it is because it recapitulates the terms of the spiritual impasse Arnold confessed to Clough in 1849: Arnold had wanted to see a clear goal and gain before he committed to “duty, self-denial, etc.” Without “clearly and palpably” sensing the end of his action, he had been unable to “consciously master” himself, to “hoist up the mainsail” of his will to drive him toward it. The irony is that when Arnold indeed settled on an end—the imitation of Christ—the Jesus he found in his reading of the Bible exemplified a sensibility that categorically precluded the kind of certainty that Arnold as a younger man had desired as a condition for committing heart and soul to spiritual practice.

It was all too human of Arnold to have discovered the message of the Gospel to be an answer to his own private spiritual quandary. It is even more human of him to have found an answer that justified him in not solving it. I regard these ironies as they inflected Arnold’s

74 CPW vi: 293.
personal spiritual life with compassion. Yet these personal ironies also had political effects. Unreconciled to his own desire for spiritual certainty, Arnold ceaselessly criticized those who seemed to have achieved it: from *Culture and Anarchy* through “The Study of Poetry,” Arnold used all his rhetorical gifts to hammer those members of Protestant churches who privileged their own reading of the Bible over the dictates and discipline of the Anglican Church. It remains to us to consider the effects of Arnold’s polemic on his own dream of a spiritually united England and upon the discourse of religion that he left as a legacy to the discipline of literary studies.

### iii. Arnold’s Third Problem: How to build up a liberal Church of England

Written in response to the cultural and political changes promised by the Reform Act of 1867, *Culture and Anarchy* argued that British society needed spiritual and critical disciplines that would instruct its middle classes in the proper use of the power that attended their enfranchisement. One underappreciated vehicle for the formation of these classes in their climb toward “total perfection” was the Church of England. To be a member of a church established in the pursuit of a *via media* between Catholic tradition and Protestant reform and a national church intended to comprehend the diversity of all the English people was “in itself a lesson of religious moderation, and a help towards culture and harmonious perfection.” Established churches, Arnold elaborated, “tend to give us a sense of a historical life of the human spirit, outside and beyond our own fancies and feelings; how they thus tend to suggest new sides and sympathies in us to cultivate.”

The obstacle to this union and its possibilities for growth, from Arnold’s perspective, was “Nonconformity” or “Dissent,” the blanket terms for the diverse Protestant denominations that
refused membership in the Church of England. In their historical reality, these churches had significant theological differences: the Wesleyan Methodists’ pursuit of perfection or sanctification would have seemed like unadulterated Arminianism to the Congregationalists or the Presbyterians, whose theological forebear was Calvin. Moreover, given that many had been founded in the 17th century with the express aim of allowing congregations to organize their worship independent of external interference, it is risky to lump them together. This is precisely what Arnold did, however, for his own polemical purposes. For Arnold, Nonconformity was reducible to a stubbornly naïve reading of the Bible for literal facts and divine commands to be obeyed, and it was close to the root of the “paramount obligation of duty, self-control, and work” that Arnold defined as “Hebraism.” For Arnold drew a proto-Weberian connection between the spirit of Nonconformity and the political/economic ethos of its middle-class adherents: “how entirely does the narrow and mechanical conception of our secular business proceed from a narrow and mechanical conception of our religious business! What havoc do the united conceptions make of our lives!”

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75 Among them, the largest body was Wesleyan Methodism, the product of 18th century evangelical revival. (After the first decades of the 19th century, there were also those who identified as “Primitive” Methodists, who wished to continue with the techniques of that revival, which the Methodist Conference had come to judge as extravagant.) There were also the denominations that had declared their dissent from the Anglican Church in the 16th and 17th centuries—both out of affinity for Calvinist theology and in pursuit of greater local control over worship: the Congregationalists (or Independents, as they were still sometimes called in the later 19th century), the Baptists, the Presbyterians. Finally, Nonconformity included non-evangelical dissenters such as the Quakers and Unitarians. Given their evident theological differences, the cohesion of these denominations was primarily political: they had common cause in the abolition of privileges enjoyed by the Established Church. See D.W. Bebbington, The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870-1914 (London: George Allen & Unwin), 1982.

76 As Stephen Koss notes, Anglicanism too was wracked by internal disagreement over theology and liturgy: it was hardly the monolith it seemed to its enemies. Thus, as Koss notes, it was in politics, “where superficial characteristics often count for most,” that “each side manifested a cohesion it lacked in other spheres.” Stephen Koss, Nonconformity in Modern British Politics (London: B.T. Batsford, 1975), 15.

77 Culture and Anarchy; CPW v: 163.

78 ibid, 186.
Arnold’s solution to the religious divisions in his England followed the same template as his prescription for the opposition of “Hellenism” and “Hebraism” in *Culture and Anarchy*: they should be joined in the pursuit of shared goals. Arnold had argued that the rigorous discipline and passion for action that characterized Hebraism could be put in service of the perfection that only Hellenic reflection could know. Arnold’s putative goal in his religious criticism was to likewise persuade the Nonconformists to abandon their “provinciality” and to make their devotional intensity a resource for the living out of the Gospel within a latitudinarian Anglicanism. He sought “to cure the provincialism of the Nonconformists, not by making Churchmen provincial along with them, but by letting their popular church discipline…appear in the National Church once more.” The liberal establishment that Arnold represented would be strengthened by the fire and strength of the Nonconformists’ commitment to moral action in every sphere of life; in turn, by being brought back into contact, “as their greater fathers were, with the main stream of national life,” the sharp edges of Nonconformist doctrine would be worn smooth.

But what was, precisely, the Gospel was that the nation would live out? Arnold cannot say, because the idea of the Church that he is constructing does not identify settled doctrines: “she does not insist that all who are in communion with her should hold them; she does not repel from her communion those who hold doctrines at variance with them….She thus provides room for growth and further change in these very doctrines themselves.” What Arnold also does not say, but implicitly demands, is that the Nonconformists give up their understanding of the Gospel

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79 “As our idea of holiness enlarges, and our scope of perfection widens beyond the narrow limits to which the over-rigour of Hebraising has tended to confine it, we shall come again to Hebraism for that devout energy in embracing our ideal, which alone can give to man the happiness of doing what he knows.” “Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*” [1869], *CPW* v: 255.

80 ibid, 237.

81 “Puritanism and the Church of England,” *CPW* vi: 103.
as the historical fact of Incarnation and Resurrection, and that all who believe in Christ may have eternal life. This Arnold calls a “fatal self-righteousness, grounded on a false conceit of knowledge,” which “makes comprehension impossible.” (Comprehension here is a technical term for the integration of the dissenters into the Church of England.) Such a position “takes for granted the possession of the truth, and the power of deciding how others violate it; and this is a position of superiority, and suits conquest rather than comprehension.” The passage is ironic: despite Arnold’s attempts to project the disinterestedness proper to a critic, this description could just as easily be applied to his position. Arnold’s pursuit of comprehension masked a more subtle, but no less aggressive attempt to conquer the primary rival to his theology.

That theology, again, is part of the tradition I defined in the introduction as Protestant Modernism. This is made perhaps most clear in the 1869 Preface to Culture and Anarchy, in the terms on which Arnold there invited the Nonconformists to a newly inclusive, “comprehensive” Church of England. Arnold wrote,

Instead of battling for his own private forms for expressing the inexpressible and defining the undefinable, a man takes those which have commended themselves most to the religious life of his nation; and while he may be sure that within those forms the religious side of his own nature may find its satisfaction, he has leisure and composure to satisfy other sides of his nature as well."

In this ideal church, doctrinal disputes would not be divisive because all would agree that religion traditions are ultimately attempts to “express the inexpressible” and thus should not be taken too seriously, but regarded objects for critical interpretation. A further value of that national church would be that it would teach its members to interpret scripture and doctrine in

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82 Arnold concludes this essay with an endorsement of Tillotson’s 1689 proposal for comprehension, which would have had Nonconformists accepted and reconciled with the CoE rather than “tolerated,” as in fact what happened.
83 ibid, 74-5.
84 “Preface to Culture and Anarchy; CPW v: 239.”
these expressive terms: “by saving us from having to invent and fight for our own forms of religion, they give us leisure and calm to steady our view of religion itself,—the most overpowering of objects, as it is the grandest.” Yet for those nonconformists among Arnold’s readers, who most needed to be convinced to join the national church, “religion” was not an object of disinterested critical attention, but an existential question of salvation.

It may well be that Arnold really believed that he was merely laying the groundwork for a liberal discourse that would bring the nation closer to a spiritual consensus. Given the terms on which Arnold grounded that debate, however, it was an invitation that would have forced the Nonconformists to refuse.

Arnold was of course correct that a belief in the literal accuracy of the biblical record could not be sustained in light of new historical-critical scholarship and scientific discoveries. But Arnold was notably uninclined to help the Nonconformists come to grips with a reality that many of them no doubt found painful to contemplate; nor did he engage with their desire for certainty—the very desire that he had repressed within himself. Instead, insisting on his own expressivist frame, he pulled a discursive power-play in which their propositional beliefs were reframed as reified forms of sectarian self-interest. The member of the Established Church finds spiritual rest and nourishment in the forms of worship passed down through the centuries, forms which have attained a universality that transcends the theological preferences of one party or another.

But with the member of a Nonconforming or self-made religious community, how different! The sectary’s…precious discoveries of himself and his friends for expressing the inexpressible and defining the undefinable in peculiar forms of their own, cannot but, as he has voluntarily chosen them, fill his whole mind. He is zealous to do battle for them and affirm them; for in affirming them he affirms himself, and that is what we all like.  

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85 ibid, 243-4.  
86 ibid, 239.
The concluding gesture of false modesty is characteristically Arnoldian: he understands his opponents’ position, because he has been tempted by that self-interested position, he knows its limitations, and he has transcended them into a disinterested, universal vantage. The issue, then, is not that the members of Nonconformist traditions find something there that they feel is of supreme value; it is that they stubbornly and selfishly refuse to accept the universal (and thus, to use an Arnoldian phrase, “infinitely prepossessing”) terms of the modernist Anglicanism that Arnold is here constructing.

Lingering in the background of this discourse is Arnold’s connection between the Nonconformists and the disposition he had called “Hebraism” in *Culture and Anarchy*. Many scholars have noted that Arnold depends upon a racialized other both to as the dichotomous contrast to his own racially coded ideal of “Englishness” and as the form of difference that liberal culture is supposed to obviate or overcome.\(^87\) When we locate that thinking in the context of on Arnold’s apology for a comprehensively liberal Church of England, two additional elements become clear. First, like Schleiermacher before him, Arnold appropriated the supersession narrative that generations of Christians have used to justify all manner of abuse against Jews: he adapted the structure, however, to place other “Hebraists”—other Christians who held to the propositional truth of Christian doctrine—in the role of the stubborn sectarians who bear all the blame for social and political difference.

\(^87\) As Bryan Cheyette has argued, “It is precisely by foregrounding racial particularity that liberalism can then lay claims to ‘civilize’ or ‘universalize’ the racial ‘others’ that it ‘emancipates.’” *Culture and Anarchy* “re-enacts the ambivalent process of liberal accommodation with its racial ‘other.’ The ‘other,’ in these terms, must divest itself of its racial particularism before being assimilated into a supposedly ‘universalist’ culture.” *Constructions of ‘The Jew’ in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 19-20. Jonathan Freedman makes the same point, that Arnoldian culture needs an opponent upon which it can prove its inclusivity, “whose suppleness is performed, in fact, by the very act of incorporating into its purview the figure of the Hebrew.” *The Temple of Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 46.
Secondly, however, we can see that while Arnold disparages the Nonconformists or “Hebraists” for their refusal to join his liberal project, his theology depends on that refusal—on their continued existence as “other.” Given that Arnold refused to give his new and “critical” Christianity any positive characteristics, it was ultimately dependent for its definition on the stubborn literalism it was supposed to replace. Arnold positioned himself as already having arrived at the disposition that would make such unity possible; but it is instructive that his most evocative descriptions of that unity depend upon its contrast with the inassimilable and unredeemable particularity of Nonconformist belief.

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I have argued that that Arnold established a specifically literary sensibility as a new form of religious authority that would preserve the eternal truth of Christianity as he understood it. It was this sensibility—this Christianity—that Arnold sought to preserve and nurture by bringing “the best fruits of letters” to more and more members of English society. The implication is that the “Arnoldian replacement narrative” that undergirds the disciplinary identity of literary criticism as secular needs revision: Arnold was not suggesting that religion would be replaced by the study of poetry or literature or “culture;” he was coopting such study as a foundation for Christian discipleship.

I have also argued, however, that such discipleship could not do the work Arnold wanted religion to do—not in his own personal life, and not in his vision of social and political reform of English society. Looking closely at the concrete operation of the interpretive method that Arnold ascribed to Jesus, I argued that this method in fact recapitulates the circularity that kept him from committing to discipline his will in 1849. On the political level, Arnold’s theology promised a

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88 Though I will not explore this argument further here, this gives us concrete reasons to doubt one tenet of implicit faith that the discipline of literary criticism and the broader humanist tradition of cultural
form of national spiritual unity on terms almost tailor-made to force their rejection by the readers Arnold was supposed to be welcoming.

What, then, was Arnold’s theology good for? I would suggest that, for one, this theology was very effective at establishing a discourse of “religion” in the discipline of literary studies. In this discourse, the pointed critiques that Arnold made of the nonconforming churches (“most of what now passes with us for religion”) have been generalized to apply to “religion” as a generic phenomenon. The context of rich theological debate and fierce polemic that stood behind “The Study of Poetry” has been largely forgotten; the presuppositions and methods that Arnold proposed in opposition to propositional belief have ceased to appear religious at all. Through Arnold, I argue, Protestant Modernism assumed the status of the “unmarked”—the secular—against which literary studies identified other theologies as marked by difference and anticipated their supersession by the methods and dispositions that appeared free of any theological freight.

Ironically, Eliot’s theological antagonism to Arnold only helped solidify these terms. Recall that Eliot read Arnold to be arguing that one should “get all the emotional kick out of Christianity one can, without the bother of believing it.” Eliot was reading Arnold through his own theory of religion, which was organized around orthodoxy—the propositional truths of traditional Christian doctrine—Arnold’s theology amounted to “coffee without caffeine, tea without tannin.”89 Rightly finding Arnold hostile to strongly held propositional beliefs, Eliot lumped him in with irreligious contemporaries like Richards. Given the authority Eliot’s criticism enjoyed in the 1930s and in the decades that followed, it is unsurprising that many readers took him at his word; it is also unsurprising that few readers wanted to mount a theological challenge to Eliot’s Anglican orthodoxy. For Eliot’s critics, it was easiest to dismiss criticism inherit from Arnold. That is the faith that the habits of critical reading will implicitly form the desire of readers to act on the ethical principles they discover in what they read.

his beliefs on the terms that Arnold had set fifty years before, and that Eliot’s reactionary politics
and disdain for modernity seemed to invite: religion—as propositional belief—was a thing of the
past.
Innovations in Conservative Hermeneutics:
John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Biblical Fundamentalism

i.

“We live in an age in which miracles of all kinds are suspect, including the kind of miracle of which the poet speaks…We had better not ignore it, or try to ‘reduce’ it to a level that distorts it. We had better begin with it, by making the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem.”

—Cleanth Brooks

John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks were united in their desire for poetry to have an ontology, and also in their desire for poetry to have more than one. Both wanted poems to be two different kinds of object at the same time. On the one hand, Brooks and Ransom were committed to the idea that poems constituted a kind of communicative miracle that the modern world denied at its own peril. Poetry demanded to be read (and read closely) because it could register the immediacy and organic fullness of human experience—a fullness that modern technocratic society was continually reducing to its instrumental parts. As Brooks put it, the poet’s task is to “return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience.” For Ransom, a poem should be regarded as “nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre” in which the poet perpetuates “an order of existence which in actual life is constantly crumbling beneath his touch.”

Science and its applications in industrial capitalism

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2 For Brooks, see the epigraph; Ransom also wrote: “Scientific predication concludes an act of attention but miraculism initiates one. It leaves us looking, marveling, and reveling in the thick dinglich substance that has just received its strange representation.” “Poetry: A Note on Ontology,” The World’s Body (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Sate University Press, 1968 [1938]): 142. Hereafter TWB.
broke life down into abstracted, manipulable data; poetry by contrast honored every element of experience as “real, individual, and qualitatively infinite.” On this score, a poem was a conduit to objects in their ontological infinity; as the Romantics before them had done, these “New Critics” claimed that poetry was a means of entry to the real world, restored to its fullness.

On the other hand, Brooks and Ransom were also invested in the poem as an autonomous, organic object that referred to nothing but itself. As an individual and indivisible complex of form and content, a poem was irreducible to prose paraphrase. Brooks famously called such paraphrase a “heresy:” a successful poem, he wrote, quoting Archibald MacLeish, “should not mean / but be.” Ransom called such a poem an “icon” which ceased to be defined by its reference to an object in the world. Having “too many properties and too many values” of its own, it became such an object. And, as we shall see, as such an object in the world, the poem was obtainable by the same kind of fine-grained, dispassionate empirical inquiry that produced knowledge in the modern research university. Ransom called for criticism to become “more scientific, or precise and systematic” in its description and evaluation of these poetic objects.

3 “Criticism, Inc.,” TWB, 348.
5 WWU, 151. The lines conclude MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica,” Collected Poems 1917-1982 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985): 106. One significant problem with which this chapter is concerned is already evident in these lines. This most quotable statement of the coherence theory is taken from a poem: the theory that poems are internally coherent entities from which no statement or commentary can be abstracted is rendered, ironically, by a decontextualized quotation of the concluding couplet from MacLeish’s poem.
7 “Criticism, Inc.,” TWB, 329. Especially as others like W.K. Wimsatt reified this model of a poem as a closed, internally coherent system, the movement came to embrace an empiricist methodology that, to many, seemed diametrically opposed to the anti-instrumental, anti-scientific defense of poetry as a “miracle” of communication. W.K. Wimsatt extended this train of thought in essays collected as The Verbal Icon; the most famous of these, co-authored with Monroe Beardsley, were “The Intentional
Scholars have developed different ways of understanding the intersection of these empiricist methods and the anti-instrumental, anti-scientific rhetoric. It has been understood as a fatal contradiction of philosophical premises. It has been understood as an unholy alliance between the reactionary cultural politics of the Southern Agrarians and the methods of the techno-industrialist society they were reacting against. Most persuasively, others have explained these two concepts of poetry as products of two distinct and yet overlapping polemics. The theory of poetry as a self-contained object that expressed nothing but itself was a useful tactic in Ransom and Brooks' bid for power within English departments in the research university: this theory made obsolete all the factions of the old guard—the “professors” of literary history, the belle-lettrists, the moralists—and cleared the way for a new brand of “critics” to supplant them with formalist analyses of poetic technique. The theory of poetry as corresponding to the plenum of “reality” was part of an implicit polemic against scientists and philosophers outside English departments who considered literature irrelevant to the trajectory of human inquiry: it was also, perhaps more importantly, a means of counterattack upon a positivist epistemology that Brooks and Ransom saw as a morally relativist and spiritually vacuous.

Fallacy” and “The Affective Fallacy.” In the former, they wrote that a poem should be understood like a “pudding or a machine:” criticism should describe how the internal machinery of each poem works and praise those poems that are without “lumps or bugs.” Both essays are collected in W.K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1982). Wimsatt and Beardsley are the most heavily anthologized of these empiricists who followed Ransom’s metaphorical connection between criticism and chemical or engineering.

10 Graff, Literature Against Itself, 129ff.
11 Ransom defined positivism as the belief that human knowledge could be cleanly divided into “historical facts and scientific generalizations on the one hand, and errors and lies on the other.” God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930): 103. Hereafter GWT. Given Ransom’s polemical relation, it is unsurprising that he regarded the scientific enterprise in such oversimple, monolithic terms. My dear friend Matt Rickard has pointed out that despite the institutional power of logical positivism in the early twentieth century, the decades of
This chapter argues that the interpretive practice that Brooks and Ransom advocated unequivocally—“making the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem”—maintains the entanglement of these two concepts of poetry and is sustained by a slippage between them. The first aim of this chapter is thus to offer a functional account of “New Critical” close reading that views this slippage as a feature, not a bug. However “close” their reading was of what a poem “said,” it served to advance their claim that poetry mounted a challenge to positivist disciplines while also projecting poetry beyond any challenge that those disciplines might pose to it.

This chapter argues, secondly, that as an apologetic strategy designed to legitimize and protect a form of “poetic knowledge” that exceeded propositional (“prose”) statements, close reading thus recursively extends the problematic of Protestant modernism. The irony is that Brooks and Ransom’s *apologia* for poetry led Brooks and Ransom to attack the historicist hermeneutics that Schleiermacher and his heirs had advanced—on the grounds that they were not modern and critical enough.

This chapter clarifies the stakes of this strategy through an extended comparison with another set of innovative hermeneutics that were developed by a different community of conservative readers who were also hostile to the institutional power that historicist methods had accrued in the university: the biblical hermeneutics developed by Protestant modernism’s *theological* opponents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These opponents have often been lumped together under the rubric of “fundamentalism.” Informed by the work of recent scholars, I regard this term skeptically: “fundamentalism” was an invention of its liberal

Ransom’s own career also saw the development of a significant disagreement within “science” as to the possibility of positivism; the most important statement of the terms of that disagreement (and the most persuasive disproof of the “atomic fact”) came in W.O. Quine’s 1951 essay “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in From a Logical Point of View: Logico-Philosophical Essays (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1953): 20-46.
opponents.\textsuperscript{12} Though coined by the Northern Baptist conservative Curtis Lee Laws to describe his position within a local conflict within the Northern Baptist denomination, the term was almost immediately coopted by theological liberals and secular progressives and applied to a heterogeneous collection of anti-evolutionists, pre-millennial dispensationalists, radical evangelicals, and straightforward conservatives.\textsuperscript{13} In the late 1920s, liberals invented a coalition of such groups that they deemed ignorant, intolerant, or otherwise backwards as a tactical move to draw a series of discrete local conflicts into a world-historical conflict known as the “Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy.”\textsuperscript{14} (Needless to say, the fundamentalists lost: the framing of the controversy as such made their embarrassment an inevitability.)

This framing obscures the fact that theological conservatives developed and appropriated a number of innovative and thoroughly modern methods in the late nineteenth and early


\textsuperscript{13} There were three primary battles that comprised this controversy: a conservative campaign to return the Northern Baptist convention to a statement of “orthodoxy,” whose failure led to a schism; a similar campaign within the Presbyterian Church of America—and specifically centered at its flagship seminary in Princeton, NJ—also resulting in a schism of denomination (and the founding of Westminster Seminary in Glenside, PA, as the flagship institution of the new Orthodox Presbyterian Church); and the battle over teaching of evolution in public schools, most publicly fought at the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. Hamilton argues that these three battles were fought by three separate coalitions that had “hardly any overlapping personnel” (233).

\textsuperscript{14} As Hamilton notes, the movement had been tailor-made for liberal mockery: for writers in the Times, no doubt drawing on H.L. Mencken’s coverage of the Scopes Trial, “fundamentalists might be dangerous if they were not so ridiculous” (242). This in turn informs late 21st century liberals’ surprise that fundamentalism has in many ways become the theological and political opponent that 1920s liberals had fictively concocted.
twentieth century.\textsuperscript{15} To compass the breadth and complexity of these positions and methods is far beyond the scope of this chapter: my interest is in the ambivalent effects of a broad shift within conservative hermeneutics from a defense of the Bible’s “inspiration” to a defense of its “inerrancy” and the new kinds of reading practices that inerrancy sanctioned. As a result, I focus narrowly on three minority movements that collectively illustrate this shift: “Old School” Princeton theology, pre-millennial dispensationalism, and the non-denominational evangelicalism that produced \textit{The Fundamentals}, a twelve-volume series of essays assailing theological liberalism that was mailed free of charge to every minister, Sunday School superintendent, YMCA supervisor, and seminary professor in the United States between 1910 and 1915.\textsuperscript{16}

This chapter does not argue that the “New Criticism” and “fundamentalism” are the same, or that one is reducible to the other. Nor do I argue that the biblical hermeneutics I describe here exerted any influence on Ransom or Brooks, or on the literary hermeneutics they developed a few decades afterwards: I am not aware of any such influence. These reading programs were disciplinarily distinct from one another; each movement was also internally diverse. Nonetheless, there are certain family resemblances between the claims each movement made for its cherished texts and the reading practices they developed in light of those claims.

Both movements were self-consciously organized in opposition to historicist scholarship and its installation as the privileged method within a new site of cultural authority and


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{The Fundamentals}, vol. i-xii (Chicago: Testimony Publishing Company, n.d.). Though they preferred to remain anonymous, the project was conceived and initially funded by the oil magnates Lyman and Milton Stewart. The series had three consecutive editors during its run: A.C. Dixon, Louis Meyer, and R.A. Torrey.
institutional formation: the modern research university. Their hermeneutics were formed in an antagonistic engagement with the disciplinary regime that the university represented: the ongoing project of knowledge-production by and for a decentralized group of specialized professionals. As we have already seen, the practice of “close reading” was for Brooks, Ransom, and Wimsatt inseparable from their assault upon the contemporary practice of literary scholarship. Even Brooks, the most irenic of the three, decried a literary pedagogy in which “the poetry of the past becomes significant merely as cultural anthropology, and the poetry of the present, merely as a political, or religious, or moral instrument.” Likewise, historian D.G. Hart has called the antagonism between “fundamentalists” and “modernists” a “referendum on whether the Protestant churches would countenance the university’s conception of Christianity.”

Both biblical and literary conservatives derided what they saw as liberal academics’ cowardly failure to address the text itself—the Bible or the poem: these scholars preferred to produce knowledge about the text (especially the historical, cultural, or biographical situation of

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18 As Joseph North has noted, although the practice of close reading has become tightly tied to Brooks, Ransom, and their investment in an autonomous sphere of aesthetics, I.A. Richards pioneered the technique under the rubric of practical criticism—with an eye to the production and refinement of the reader’s capacity to describe and analyze complex phenomena like poems—and also like every other form of human experience. North also credits Richards with an insight more germane to the purposes of this chapter: that literary criticism would need to develop methods that were “repeatable, reliable, and precise enough” to fit among other disciplines in the modern research university.” Joseph North, “What’s ‘New Critical’ about ‘Close Reading’? I.A. Richards and His New Critical Reception,” *New Literary History* 44.1 (Winter 2013): 141-57; 146. This essay has been reworked as part of North’s intriguing new book *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

19 *WWU*, xi.

its author) and to interpret the text as an expression of those conditions; alternatively, trusting in their own “inner voice” to respond intuitively to the texts’ deep meaning, these scholars focused only on those parts of the text that resonated with their sensibility. For conservatives, this was shamefully subjective, irrational, and frankly effeminate. Ransom insisted that criticism of poetry should be hard and objective: not the sentimental effusions of “Miss Millay’s fan club” or “the Circles and Leagues of young ladies.”

The Christian fundamentalists were only slightly more blunt in their masculinist attack on the cossetted liberal scholar of the Bible who had naturalized its miracles and allegorized its supernaturalism. Hearing a soft-spoken liberal commentator on the radio, the prolific anti-evolution writer William Bell Riley told an audience that he felt “absolutely sure” that “the chap was…a Ph.D.;” “I have seen their sort; I have even faced them in controversy, and felt half ashamed to pit my masculinity against their effeminacy.”

Against this feminized academic establishment, these critics insisted on a macho confrontation with the “facts” of the text itself. Brooks asserted that students should make “the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem.” Likewise Reuben Torrey, a superintendent at the Moody Bible Institute and later an editor of The Fundamentals, demanded that his readers “Go to the Book itself,” rather than reading it as merely a collection of documents written by “men who did not know quite as much as the very self-sufficient teachers at Chicago University know;” the Bible requires of each reader the “closest and most minute study.”

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21 TWB, 76.
23 Reuben Archer Torrey, The Importance and Value of Proper Bible Study: How Properly to Study and Interpret the Bible (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1921), 34; 31; 35. Torrey’s analogue for this close reading was that of a lawyer attending carefully to the language of a contract, or discerning “the meaning of any law on our statute books” (67). For the confluence of legal hermeneutics and conservative Biblical hermeneutics in the Moody movement, see Gloege, Guaranteed Pure.
In what follows, I trace the parallel genealogy of the inerrant Bible and the New Critical poem: texts which would reward such close reading. Both texts were conservative productions, intended to recoup a privileged position at the center of a unified, coherent cosmos. Both were also conservative innovations, and these innovations had similarly ambivalent results. Both were intended to reclaim a position of social and political authority that had been usurped by the “scientific” knowledge produced in universities—but also to co-opt the authority of such scientific knowledge and the institution that sanctioned it. Both were timeless and transcendent textual objects whose internal complexity could never be compassed by knowledge, but whose infinite complexity could be proved by the application of specialized and “scientific” techniques. Both were constructed implicitly according to the terms of the disciplinary regime they were intended to supplant; both were fashioned into maximally coherent, infinitely complex worlds sealed off from the world they were supposed to redeem.

ii.

When a few vanguard seminary professors began writing about and teaching the higher criticism in the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century, their historicist methods posed little threat to the dominant model of biblical theology. The old guard of conservative Bible-readers responded not with trepidation but with serene skepticism: they initially understood historicism not as adisciplinary rival but as a valid method that only needed to be recontextualized within an orthodox epistemology.

For these confident conservatives, to read the Bible was to confront God’s self-revelation with a mind created by God to know the true and authoritative meaning of the text directly. For these readers, questions about the where and when of scripture’s authorship were legitimate and
important, but secondary to process by which the reader was opened to the meaning God had intended in those words. Such conservatives operated from one of two distinct but often overlapping theological frameworks. The first was common sense realism; the second was the broader Protestant belief in the Bible’s “perspicuity:” that the Holy Spirit guided faithful readers to the true meaning of scripture.

Common sense realism was the epistemology and worldview that had dominated American Protestant theology since the late 18th century.24 Its first premise was that God’s truth was a single unified order; its second was that human beings had been created with the innate capacity to know that truth directly. Often called “the Scottish philosophy,” having been formulated principally by Thomas Reid in Edinburgh, promulgated by his successor Dugald Stewart, and brought to the American colonies by John Witherspoon, who left Scotland in 1768 to become president of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, it was a democratic vision that was broadly appealing in the revolutionary era.25 As Kant would be after him, Reid was stirred from his philosophical slumbers by Hume’s skepticism: by comparison with Kant’s critiques, his solution was more blunt.


Reid held that the human mind had been built as a conduit for direct knowledge of the world, without the influence or mediation of ideas. He defined “common sense” as the felt unity of a perception and the immediate judgment that it was real. The judgment was part and parcel of the perception; such convictions were, for Reid, “part of that furniture, which nature hath given to the human understanding...part of our constitution, and all the discoveries of our reason are grounded upon them.”26 The function of this furniture was to produce facts. Moreover, just as the human mind was constituted to know the facts of experience directly, so too was human nature crafted to trace those facts to general rules. Such an inductive process “is familiar to every human creature in the common affairs of life, and it is the only one by which any real discovery in philosophy can be made;...he who philosophizes by other rules, either concerning the material system, or concerning the mind, mistakes his aim.”27 Reid’s methodological exemplar was Francis Bacon, or rather, the “Lord Bacon” that he and his successor Dugald Stewart enshrined as the father of modern science.28 Through humble and painstaking collection of the sense-data of the world, every human being could make provisional generalizations that would derive their authority from their intimate contact with the facts. The professional scientist simply instituted a more targeted and rigorous version of this intuitive method.

In the revolutionary era and the antebellum era, the excitement for such methods was ecumenical.29 Common sense had a particularly influential platform at Princeton Theological Seminary, the flagship Presbyterian seminary—and they held onto this belief in the holistic

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27 *ibid*, 11-2.
28 Bozeman writes that Bacon the moralist, the statesman, and the prose stylist had vanished: “The Bacon who stood forth was supremely the creator of the inductive method” (5).
29 “Evangelical Christians and liberal Enlightenment figures alike assumed that the universe was governed by a rational system of laws guaranteed by an all-wise and benevolent creator. The function of science was to discover such laws.” Marsden, 15.
systematicity of common sense longer than most others. As Charles Hodge, the esteemed Princeton systematic theologian wrote in 1872, the Bible “is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.”

Common sense was more than a method of scientific inquiry: it was also the Old School model of Biblical hermeneutics.

The enthusiasm is understandable. The premise of Reid’s thought was that all forms of truth, natural and revealed, would inevitably fit into a single system—a system common to all, and knowable by all. Confident knowledge of the world and of the Bible required no specialized expertise. The sure perception of scriptural truth involved a union of the rational mind and the intuitive faculties.

An emotional response to the direct apprehension of God’s salvific power and grace was therefore not only licit, but expected. In other words, that which we would call “subjective” experience could suffice for confident knowledge—including that form of subjective conviction known as faith. If, in reading the Bible, one found oneself “solidly assured” of the deity of Christ, for example, that belief would be valid “on adequate grounds, appealing to the reason.”

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31 For a defense and demonstration of the Common Sense frame for a faith “so begotten of reason and interpenetrated by it that they can never come into conflict,” see Mark Hopkins, “Grounds of Knowledge and Rules for Belief,” *The Princeton Review* (1881), 1-18; 18.

32 This is not to suggest that they did not argue vehemently against the Schleiermachian theology of feeling that valorized an interior experience independent of a propositional (and thus public) truth. Charles Hodge had a heated exchange with Andover Theological Seminary Professor Edwards A. Park, over Park’s claim that the theology of feeling and the theology of intellect should be seen in opposition to one another. Marsden 112; see Charles Hodge, “Professor Park’s Sermon,” *Princeton Review* XXII (October, 1850), 643-5.

In 1881, Benjamin Warfield and Archibald Alexander Hodge (son of Charles) wrote an essay reasserting the orthodox Presbyterian position on biblical inspiration against the excesses of historicism. The essay largely focused on the restatement of a single point of doctrine: “the Scriptures not only contain, but ARE, THE WORD OF GOD, and hence that all their elements and all their affirmations are absolutely errorless and binding the faith and obedience of men.”

To appreciate the contrast of this position with the hermeneutics to follow, their claim that Bible was “errorless” needs to be carefully unpacked. For Hodge and Warfield promptly proceeded to qualify their claim:

“...it is not claimed that the Scriptures any more than their authors are omniscient. The information they convey is in the forms of human thought, and limited on all sides. They were not designed to teach philosophy, science, or human history as such. They were not designed to furnish an infallible system of speculative theology. They are written in human languages, whose words, inflections, constructions, and idioms bear everywhere indelible traces of human error.”

Hodge and Warfield carved out a position between two concepts of biblical inspiration they found untenable. On the one hand, they rejected as too loose the liberal idea that the Holy Spirit had broadly “influenced” the human authors of the Bible. This was the royal road to relativism: it would be impossible to determine what in the Bible was legible as human intention and what was divine. On the other hand, they rejected any suggestion of “verbal inspiration,” in which the human authors simply transcribed divine dictations: this, they noted, the Scriptures “never profess.” They stressed a middle position of “plenary inspiration,” or divine “superintendence:” they held that the Holy Spirit had attended to and guided the long process of the Bible’s composition, compilation, and canonization.

“The Scriptures were generated through sixteen centuries of this divinely regulated concurrence of God and man, of the natural and the supernatural, of reason and

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35 ibid, 238.
36 ibid.
revelation, of providence and grace. It is an organism consisting of many parts, each adjusted to all the rest, as the 'many members’ to the ‘one body.’”

For Hodge and Warfield, the indelible traces of human error actually served as evidence that the Bible was an object of transcendent intention and authority. Only the superintendence of the Holy Spirit could have formed the Bible’s many texts into a single, unified whole. For them the text of the Bible was itself a proof that God acted in and through the natural order, turning human means to divine ends and making a magnificent and harmonious whole out of diverse and occasionally discordant parts. Then the Holy Spirit had “sealed the entire record and all its elements, however generated, with the imprimatur of God, sending it to us as His Word.”

Rhetorically, Hodge and Warfield betrayed very little anxiety about the resilience of the Common Sense regime of truth: their “Inspiration” essay assumed the plummy tone of assured authority. For them, the Bible was still a store-house of facts ready for careful analysis and rigorous Baconian induction. This confidence was in no small measure a privilege of their institutional power and influence. Both were professors within the fortress of conservative Presbyterian thought at Princeton Theological Seminary. For Warfield and Hodge, the burden of proof rested on the Higher Critics to disprove a traditionally “realist” reading of the Bible. The Bible was a compendium of facts: one could legitimately ask about historical context or the intention of the human author, but such questions were ultimately ancillary to the project of classifying those facts that the Holy Spirit had sealed in the canonical scriptures.

Yet the fact that they found it necessary to write an essay in apologetics at all was proof enough that its authors spoke on behalf of a tradition whose hegemony had begun to fracture and fray. Historicist criticism was finding new sites of institutional power, and over the ensuing

37 ibid, 230.
38 ibid, 226.
39 “They needed only to classify the facts, and follow wherever they might lead.” Marsden, 56. See also Bozeman, 8-22.
decades, Princeton theologians’ mighty fortress would begin to crumble. Nonetheless, the holistic hermeneutics of common sense remained a present force in conservative biblical criticism for decades to come. Curtis Lee Laws, the Northern Baptist who coined the term “fundamentalism,” shared this premise with his Presbyterian brethren. In 1917 he wrote, “the infallibility of the Bible is the infallibility of common sense, and of the experimental triumph within us.” As Marsden notes, this was by no means impressionistic subjectivism; Laws simply held that the objective truth of scripture was made evident to the reader by way of intuitive confirmation, not by an argument from scientific evidence. That is, confidence in the Bible’s truth did not depend upon the Bible’s scientific accuracy. Such accuracy did matter very much to other conservative Bible-readers, to whom we now turn.

There was a second theological foundation for confidence that the individual could access the true and authoritative meaning of scripture directly: the traditional Protestant doctrine of

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40 In one of the most public conflicts of the 1920s, the few remaining defenders of common sense realism at Princeton Theological Seminary resigned in protest over the institution’s embrace of liberal hermeneutics; to continue teaching their understanding of orthodoxy, they founded their own seminary across the Pennsylvania border. In 1923, J. Grescham Machen, Princeton professor of the New Testament and the last, most trenchant defender of the Princeton Theology, acerbically delineated the antagonism: “two mutually exclusive religions are being propagated within the Presbyterian church…one is the great redemptive religion known as Christianity; the other is the naturalistic or agnostic modernism.” “The Battle Within the Churches,” in Fundamentalism versus Modernism, ed. Eldred C. Vanderlaan (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1925), 361; quoted in Kathryn Lofton, “Commonly Modern: Rethinking the Modernist- Fundamentalist Controversies,” Church History 83.1 (March 2014) 137-44; 138.

Machen’s battle against liberalism points to the inadequacy of the umbrella term “fundamentalism.” As a Princeton professor, his intellectual and cultural milieu was different than that of Reuben Torrey or Dyson Hague, and Machen certainly had no truck with the dispensationalists to which we will shortly. Marsden, for what it’s worth, locates the source of Machen’s friction with these others in his permissive stance on alcohol (174).

41 “Editorial,” Watchman-Examiner V (February 1, 1917), 135; quoted in Marsden 107.

42 Marsden 108.
The doctrine has its origins in Luther, whose attack on the mediation of the Catholic priestly hierarchy and the *magisterium* was founded on his belief that *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*: that by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, scripture is its own interpreter. Any person who humbly submitted to the guidance of the Holy Spirit could understand the clear and authoritative meaning of any biblical passage. Perspicuity was distinct from common sense realism in that it privileged no particular epistemology (no grounding of individual minds in “common” truths) but rather a discipline of faithful attention in which the Holy Spirit guided non-specialist interpreters to scripture’s plain truths. “Common Sense implied that all minds could arrive at common interpretations,” Brendan Pietsch writes: “perspicuity implied that common minds could discover remarkable new biblical truths, or recover old ones.”

If Princeton Theological Seminary was the citadel of common sense in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one contemporary nerve-center of hermeneutics premised on perspicuity was the Moody Bible Institute (MBI) in Chicago, Illinois. MBI was founded by salesman-turned-revivalist Dwight L. Moody for the training of a new kind of urban evangelist. Moody and his lieutenants built a massive Sunday School program for children and working-class adults, organized middle-class businessmen into small, lunchtime meetings for Bible-study and prayer, threw huge weekend revivals and cultivated new leaders in a program of ongoing Christian education. As Timothy Gloege has written, Moody and his followers were in the business of ministry: they actively mixed the individualistic focus of late 19th-century evangelical Protestantism with the instrumental approach to knowledge that were common in the professional worlds of business, engineering, and law. Within this “corporate” evangelical

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43 “We must recognize that it [Scripture] is in itself the most certain, most easily understood, most plain, is its own interpreter, approving, judging, and illuminating all statements of all men” *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 7, (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1892), 97-98; quoted in Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven, Yale UP, 1992), 145.

44 Pietsch, 97.
framework, the world was a coherent whole, “stretching from shop floor to prayer closet, from legal library to Bible study, from the drafting table to a defense of their faith.”²⁴⁵

At the risk of oversimplifying, I want to illustrate the pressure that the professional discipline of Biblical studies put on this holistic epistemology by focusing on a single figure. Reuben Archer Torrey was a fervent and life-long believer in scripture’s perspicuity and one of Moody’s lieutenants at the Bible Institute; he served as the superintendent of Moody’s vast Sunday School operation for seven years, and later served as an editor of The Fundamentals.²⁴⁶

Torrey’s conviction that the Holy Spirit guided the reading of every faithful Christian allowed him to embrace a heterogeneous set of practical approaches to the Bible.²⁴⁷ In his 1896 book, How to Study the Bible for Greatest Profit, Torrey outlined a number of hermeneutics for

²⁴⁵ Timothy Gloege, Guaranteed Pure, 2.
²⁴⁶ Marsden called him “a principal architect of fundamentalist thought” (47). It might also be said that Torrey represented within himself the often-incongruous and idiosyncratic theological positions, missionary movements, and interpretive schemes that historians have lumped together under the banner of “fundamentalism.” Born in 1856, he was raised in a household whose religious affiliations were typical of mid-nineteenth century elites. His father, a successful businessman, was a Unitarian Universalist, and his mother, a devout Presbyterian, led the family in Bible reading and prayer. They were not evangelicals: they made no effort to get their son to formally join a church, much less to accept Christ as his personal savior, and Torrey showed little interest in religion until his third year at Yale. After two years of pursuing “the card-table, the theatre, the dance, the horse-race, the champagne supper,” he fell into a deep depression and, in an act of suicidal desperation, prayed that if his burden would be lifted he would preach the gospel. As Timothy Gloege notes, “Torrey incongruously treated this as his conversion experience, despite the fact that he had only ‘settled’ that we would become a minister. …Torrey’s Christianity was oriented with neither the head nor the heart; it was a matter of the will—his existential decision to submit himself to God.” “A Gilded Age Modernist,” 203. Enrolling at Yale Divinity School in 1876, Torrey was initially drawn to liberal theology: he read higher criticism with interest and wrote his thesis on the New England Transcendentalists. He even did a year of post-graduate studies in Germany. But historicist inquiry did not produce the certainty he craved; that he had found only in his experience of a direct relationship with God, a relationship which he believed was available to anyone, independent of theological system, denominational tradition, or any other mediating authority. This conviction soon pushed him away from academic inquiry and toward practical mission work. He served as the supervisor of Dwight Moody’s Bible Institute in Chicago, and went on to found the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Torrey also served as an editor of The Fundamentals, conducted international revival tours, and hosted the planning meeting that gave birth to the World’s Fundamentals Association in 1920.
²⁴⁷ It also led Torrey to eschew traditional apologetics when dealing with non-believers. “He recommended that the skeptic read the Gospel of John ‘a few verses at a time’ with ‘a willingness to believe,’ having first asked God to directly lead them in this reading.” Gloege, 209.
readers to pursue; these methods were clearly meant to inform and correct one another.\textsuperscript{48} Torrey recommended reading scripture in their canonical order, in order to “get hold of the unity of the Bible and its organic character,” but also to read the scriptures in their chronological order of composition: he assumed that the scriptures were written by human authors in the language and with the concerns of their historical situation.\textsuperscript{49} He admitted that typological readings of the Bible were “greatly abused and overdone in some quarters,” but did not see that as sufficient reason to neglect the practice altogether. He was likewise cautious about plucking out verses from across the Bible on a particular topic: “a well-rounded, thorough-going knowledge of the Bible is not possible by this method of study.”\textsuperscript{50} There were directives that resonate with Charles Hodge’s conception of the Bible as a “store-house of facts:” “By your verse by verse analysis you have discovered and recorded a great number of facts. The work now is to get these facts into an orderly shape.”\textsuperscript{51} There are also explicit promptings to questions that a liberal historicist would ask of particular scriptural passages (“who wrote it?” “to whom?” “Where did he write it?” “When did he write it?” “What was the occasion of his writing?” “What were the circumstances of the author when he wrote?” “What were the circumstances of those to whom he wrote?”) and another word of caution to those who would take those passages “manifestly intended for local application” to be of universal authority.\textsuperscript{52} Rhetorical and historical context was key.

\textsuperscript{48} Reuben Archer Torrey, \textit{How to study the Bible for greatest profit} (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1896), 12.
\textsuperscript{49} Such a balanced reading, Torrey held, “is a great corrective to one-sidedness and crankiness. The Bible is a many sided book; it is Calvinistic and Arminian, it is Trinitarian and Unitarian, it clearly teaches the Deity of Christ and insists on His real humanity, it exalts faith and demands works…” (86).
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{ibid}, 58.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{ibid}, 34.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{ibid}, 17-18; 19.
Torrey’s confidence in the capacity of common people to discover the Bible’s truth was derived from different theological premises than Warfield and Hodge had invoked, but the results of that confidence were the same: both were hospitable to historicist methods when they were contextualized within a hermeneutic situation that privileged the agency of the Holy Spirit in producing confident knowledge. Without receptivity to that spirit and a willingness to apply what the spirit revealed, none of these techniques would be useful: they would generate no “profit.”53 But that word in Torrey’s title also tells of his investment in the instrumental precision and practical efficacy of modern knowledge. Introducing an outline of Bible study that stretched over five hundred pages, Torrey emphasized that “Exactness of statement is first aimed at in every instance, then clearness of statement. Beauty and impressiveness must always yield to precision and clearness….Too much devotional study of the Bible is haphazard. By the use of this book it can be made orderly, thorough, and progressive.”54 The work aspired to clarify questions of Christian doctrine in a systematic presentation of scriptural passages, with each grouping of passages summed up in a proposition. Presuming the Bible could not contradict itself, Torrey clustered together decontextualized verses from across the canonical Bible.55

53 In this respect, Torrey was very much operating in the “corporate evangelical” mode that Tim Gloege has persuasively traced in the Moody Bible Institute. Gloege’s work in Guaranteed Pure (cited above) chronicles the fascinating rise of MBI and its invention of an “old-time religion” using the early “branding” techniques of late nineteenth century advertising: Moody’s particular brand of respectable middle-class evangelicalism was not only compatible but modern consumer capitalism, “but also uniquely dependent on it.” Most applicable to the purposes of this chapter, Moody and those who built and tried to safeguard his legacy held a set of ideological convictions that actively mixed the individualistic focus of late 19th-century evangelical Protestantism with the instrumental approach to knowledge that were common in the professional worlds of business, engineering, and law.

54 R.A. Torrey, What the Bible Teaches: A Thorough and Comprehensive Study of what the Bible has to Say Concerning the Great Doctrines of which it Treats (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1898), 1-2.

55 To take but one example, the nature of divine unity is illustrated with reference (in order) to Genesis 2:24 and 11:6, 1 Corinthians 3: 6-8 and 12:13, John 17:22-3, Galatians 3:28, Genesis 1:26, 11:7, and 3:22, Isaiah 6:8, Zechariah 2:10-1, John 1:1 and 14:16, and finally Mark 1:10-1.
Such sweeping moves across scripture seemed powerful proof of Torrey’s premise that the Bible contained one clear and precise message on almost any question of doctrine. But they also served as proof that the Bible was an all-sufficient text that could interpret itself on modern grounds. “One of the most satisfactory ways of determining whether the Bible is of Divine origin or not, is by finding out precisely what it teaches and whether there is one deep philosophy running through the book composed by such a multiplicity and variety of human authors.” Unlike Luther’s conception of perspicuity, which hinged on the presence of the Holy Spirit to illuminate the meaning of a single passage, Torrey’s Bible interpreted itself through the rigorous and systematic classification of disparate passages. The Bible’s legibility by these means had strengthened Torrey’s own conviction “that there was one Author back of the many writers, and that that one Author was God.”

In keeping with the pragmatic and evangelical thrust of the Moody Bible Institute, Torrey’s goal was not to empower readers to produce abstract, “scientific” knowledge of the Bible for its own sake, but as a means toward practical gains in the reader’s faith and life. “A surrendered will do more to make the Bible an open book than a university education.” This is one of a few oblique digs at academic Biblical scholars: but at this stage Torrey’s chiding of the higher critic is plainly a question of application: specialized knowledge produced about the Bible is only profitable when it feeds back into the reader’s own faith. When the Bible is approached as the Word of God, historicist questions are welcome: indeed they are omitted “only at a great sacrifice.”

Twenty-five years later, however, Torrey’s irenic tone had faded, his hostility to the higher criticism had increased, and his target had narrowed to the institutional site of such

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56 ibid, 2.
57 Torrey, How to study the Bible for greatest profit, 102.
58 ibid, 19.
criticism: the university. “Many distinguished university professors say we should study the Bible just as we study any other book,” Torrey wrote, demonstrating the durability of Jowett’s phrase from a half-century before; “and they fancy that they have said something wondrously wise then they have said it.”59 But the Bible “is God’s Word and all other books are men’s words.”60 Other books tell readers what other men know, but the Bible tells us what “an infinitely wise God, Who made us and all things, and consequently knows all things, has inerrantly revealed.”61

The inspired Bible was centuries old: the inerrant Bible was quite new, and it was a new weapon in Torrey’s apologetic arsenal.62 Inerrancy was a more local and controlled form of inspiration—“verbal” inspiration. The Spirit was there not only to guide faithful readers to the text’s true meaning, nor had the Spirit superintended the long and complex process of the text’s composition and collection by fallible human beings. Through the Holy Spirit, God had dictated each word of scripture directly: “Remember that...the Holy Spirit, the unerring Spirit of God led the Bible writers in the choice of every word they wrote.”63 A true and valuable study of the Bible thus could not be produced by someone who did not accept that premise. “Every theological professor whose will is not fully surrendered to God, should be turned out of the chair he occupies in any Seminary or University.”64 Torrey raised the specter of a scholarly

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59 Reuben Archer Torrey, *The Importance and Value of Proper Bible Study; How Properly to Study and Interpret the Bible* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1921).
60 ibid, 45.
61 ibid, 17, emphasis original.
62 The doctrine of inerrancy had been approved by American Presbyterians at their General Assembly only in 1893. “The Bible as we now have it, in its various translations and revision, when freed from all errors and mistakes of translators, copyists and printers (is) the very word of God, and consequently wholly without error.” Quoted in James Gray, “The Inspiration of the Bible--Definition, Extent and Proof,” *The Fundamentals* iii (Chicago: Testimony Publishing Company, n.d. [1910]), 7-41; 41. Gray argued that the Holy Spirit had directed the authorship included “not only all the books of the Bible in general but in detail, the form as well as the substance, the word as well as the thought” (13).
63 Torrey, *The Importance and Value of Proper Bible Study*, 70-1.
64 ibid, 61.
apparatus that would impose itself between the believer and God as a new kind of ecclesiastical superstructure: a new intermediary built on a familiar model.

The Roman Catholic Church says that simple-minded Christians must not dare to study the Bible for themselves independently—they must go to the priest to interpret it for them; and the Chicago University says that ordinary, ‘unscholarly’ regenerate men, women and children cannot get the Bible’s real meaning for themselves, they must have some great scholar, soaked in the German infidelity of Wellhausen and Graf and their host of satellites and followers, to interpret it for them.65

Torrey saw himself in the mold of the Protestant reformers, opposing the rise of a new priestly caste that wielded not sacramental power but scholarly expertise.66

Torrey’s particular antipathy for “the Chicago University” is telling. For it was at the University of Chicago that the most explicit case had been made for the university as a site of religious authority—an authority premised on the modern, historical, and “scientific” study of the Bible. William Rainey Harper, founding president of the University, had come from Yale, where he had been professor of Biblical Studies (and a prominent supporter of Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis). At Chicago, Harper served not only as university president but also as chair of the Old Testament department, and he surrounded himself with Protestant modernist scholars who were also committed to the historical-scientific approach to scripture.67 Torrey remarked sourly that Chicago scholars studied the Bible “as if it were the word of men who did

65 ibid, 53. Karl Heinrich Graf had been instrumental in formulating the “documentary hypothesis,” in which the Pentateuch was read as a convoluted braid of four distinct sources who had contributed new text and in the case of the later authors, had redacted the others: the infamous J (the Yahwist or “Jehovist”), E (the Elohist), P (the Priestly source), and D (the Deuteronomist). Julius Wellhausen synthesized the work of Graf and others in Prolegomena to the History of Israel (1883).

66 “I love to go alone with God and His Book and see what He has to say to me, without any man’s intervention. The trouble with most of us is that we live on spoon victuals. You come here Sunday after Sunday and I ladle out to you what I have found in the Book. Go to the Book itself. I have sometimes watched a robin feed its young, and spit into their gaping mouths what it had dug up and chewed. I do not like it. It is doubtless necessary for young robins and chippy birds, but we ought to get beyond that and go right to the Book itself for ourselves.” ibid, 34.

not know quite as much as the very self-sufficient teachers at Chicago University know. 68 But Harper insisted that the truth of the Bible would only be discovered—and be made legitimate in the modern world—by continual investigation by specialized researchers. 69 In this spirit, one early hire in Chicago’s New Testament department wrote, “a historical evaluation of the gospel as it stands in the New Testament…will disclose both its historical and timeless realities and will make possible a formulation of its content in modern terms.” 70 As Thomas Olbricht notes, an authoritative reading of the text within this program depended not on one’s doctrinal orthodoxy, but “rather on having acquired philological, historical, and sociological tools in order to weigh and sift and set aside a residue that provide the foundations for human values.” 71 The University of Chicago represented the vanguard of a new institutional home for historicist methods that promised to separate the kernel of gospel truth from the husk of a primitive history. 72 To conservatives like Torrey, such a division seemed mighty subjective.

Yet it might be argued that inerrancy, in its fashion, was a way of drawing a similar distinction between the essential and the inessential, between authoritative gospel and what Torrey called “the purely speculative, the uncertain, the unprofitable, the unessential, the

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68 Torrey, The Importance and Value of Proper Bible Study, 31.
69 “The theological seminaries of the country have not been intended to serve as laboratories for the working out of problems,” Harper argued; the university clearly needed to take charge, because “[i]t is doubtful whether in the last fifty years a single important problem relating to the religious life and education had been solved” in the seminaries, which served instead “as training schools for the instruction of expert propagandists.” Harper, “Editorial,” Biblical World 24 (November 1904), 324; quoted in Lee, 527.
72 Brendan Pietsch has argued that by the 1880s and 90s, historicism had already established a strong claim to succeed common sense realism as the dominant epistemological framework in universities and elite seminaries (outside Princeton). Moreover, the Society for Biblical Literature (still one of the dominant professional organizations in religious studies) was founded on the assumption that the higher criticism was the only game in town. Dispensational Modernism (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 87ff.
unproductive, the irrelevant and the transitory,” by which Torrey meant history. Authoritative biblical interpretation required a reader to bracket questions of authorship and intention and to concentrate attention on the text itself.

This imperative to focus was the first hermeneutic consequence of Torrey’s embrace of inerrancy. Though there was much that was continuous with Torrey’s 1896 work—the pragmatic emphasis on “profit,” the emphasis on the Bible as a direct communication from God to the willing reader—the historicist questions (“who wrote it? To whom?”) had vanished by 1921. Reference to knowledge produced about the text or referring the work of meaning making beyond the bounds of the canonical Bible had been excised. Rather, Torrey suggests that the reader discern the meaning of scripture through a network of semantic and thematic connections internal to that inerrant book. “The Bible itself is the very best commentary on the Bible. There is not a doubtful or difficult passage in the Bible anywhere that some other passage does not clear up and explain, if we seek long enough for it.” For Torrey, all people could discover scripture’s true meaning if they humbly approached the text, receptive to the Holy Spirit and willing to give it the “closest and most minute study.”

The second consequence of the inerrant Bible was the requirement that readers accept ambiguities and paradox in the text. One was not to explain away the Bible’s clear teaching about the total sovereignty of God to protect its clear teaching about human freedom, or vice versa. Some apparent contradictions would always remain for readers, because the mind that

73 ibid, 12.
74 ibid, 79-80.
75 “God’s Book is full of meaning in its minutest word; and is worthy of not merely the cursory, superficial reading, the careless skimming that most people give to it” (35). Torrey’s analogue was that of a lawyer attending carefully to the language of a contract, or discerning “the meaning of any law on our statute books” (67).
inspired the text is infinite and many-sided, but human minds are “finite and one-sided.” Torrey
ever elsewhere had written that the whole trouble with Biblical interpretation “is that our narrow
minds cannot take in God’s large truth.” (This did not prevent him, however, from turning what
appeared “to our narrow minds” as internal contradictions in the Bible into positive evidence for
the Bible’s truth: Torrey’s answer to the discrepancies between the four accounts of Christ’s
resurrection, for instance, was that “[i]f four different persons had sat down to make up a story in
collusion of a resurrection that never occurred, they would have made their four accounts appear
to agree.”

Torrey argued it was the liberal impulse to explain away these apparent inconsistencies as
the “expressions” of historical human authors that gave the lie to the Chicago professors’ claim
to “scientific” knowledge of the Bible. If inerrancy was the premise—if the Bible was inspired
not only “in general but in detail, the form as well as the substance, the word as well as the
thought”—then it was possible to argue that liberal scholars had simply ignored the “facts” that
the Bible recounted: God’s mighty acts in history, the prophetic writings, Christ’s miracles, and
the testimony to his resurrection all proved the authority and power of the Bible’s message. They
had traduced their own disciplinary standards of dispassionate, objective inquiry. This was a
prevalent line of attack in The Fundamentals, which Torrey helped edit: the higher critics had set
out to prove their own prejudiced view by hook or by crook, “facts” be damned. “They were
avowed unbelievers of the supernatural,” Dyson Hague wrote. “Their hypotheses were
constructed on the assumption of the falsity of Scripture.” Hypotheses is a word charged with
animus: it meant conjecture or speculation, implicitly contrasted with the old Baconian ideal of

76 ibid, 80.
78 ibid, 49.
attending to all the available data and inductively forming general laws from those “facts.” As James Orr put it, “What the scientific man needs to prove to establish his objection to miracle is, not simply that natural causes operate uniformly, but that no other than natural causes exist; that natural causes exhaust all the causation in the universe. And that, we hold, he can never do.”

On the one hand, inerrancy was a theological premise whose explicit function was to shore up the authority that common sense and perspicuity had lost. But it also had implicit functions which had been developing for decades in other communities of Bible readers who had been seeking new methods of producing confidence belief. To those communities we now turn.

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Many late nineteenth-century conservative Protestant clergymen (they were all men, as in many conservative traditions, they still are) found themselves in a predicament. These ministers were serving churches in a time of profound social change. As Brendan Pietsch has written, in the aftermath of the Civil War,

hitherto powerful rural alliances of republican patriarchy, small-scale capitalism, and Victorian moralism began to crumble at an accelerated rate. In their place came a new order of industrial capitalism, accompanied by sweeping new immigration, messy urban politics, consumer culture, and racial, ethnic, and class struggles, all mediated onto a national stage by massive technological systems such as electric and telephone grids. In this context, fear of social change was outpaced only by desire for it.

Amid such new and overlapping complexities that confronted many Americans in their daily lives, late nineteenth-century Protestantism was moving through an epistemic crisis. Outside the fortress walls of Princeton Theological Seminary, there were plenty of signs that common sense realism was proving insufficient to the task of securing confident knowledge. Across the

82 Epistemic crisis may be written into the DNA of Protestant theology. For an account of an important precedent to this appeal to scientific methods of confident knowledge-production, see Sarah Rivett, The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
social, economic, and political landscape, there was a hunger for new tools and methods whose complexity would be equal to that of the rapidly changing world. Brendan Pietsch describes a “mania for quantification, precise measurement, classification, standardization, and ‘scientific’ explanations;” Pietsch has called this way of thinking “the taxonomic mind.” Many ministers were drawn to a new system of biblical interpretation that arose to answer to this taxonomic impulse. That system was called pre-millennial dispensationalism.

The theology had that undergirded this system had existed in various forms for centuries, but was codified and popularized in the nineteenth century by the Anglo-Irish maverick preacher John Nelson Darby and the nonconformist sect with which he was aligned, the Plymouth Brethren. One of several nineteenth-century systems of eschatological prediction, “Dispensationalism” divided the history of God’s creation into seven distinct eras or “dispensations.” Each marked a different form of God’s governance over God’s creation; each ended with a cataclysmic event: the Fall, the Flood, the destruction of the Temple of Solomon in 587 BCE, etc. The “pre-millennial” qualifier signified that Jesus Christ would return to earth to judge the living and the dead before the prophesied one-thousand year reign of justice and peace: the millennium of God’s Kingdom here on earth, the last dispensation. The world would get worse and worse until Christ would come to vanquish the forces of the Anti-Christ at the End of Days and usher in God’s Kingdom on earth. (This political pessimism contrasted sharply with

83 Pietsch, 18.
84 Marsden, 46ff.
85 Pre-millennial dispensationalism is perhaps the best-known movement under the umbrella of “fundamentalism.” It is the theology that informed the astounding success of the Left Behind series (over 80 million copies sold as of 2018) and broader cultural awareness of the “Rapture” that will signal the beginning of the “End Times.” It is certainly one of the most influential forms of conservative theology over the last 40 years of American politics. James Watt, Reagan’s Secretary of the Interior, testified before Congress that he did not know “how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns; whatever it is we have to manage with a skill to leave the resources needed for future generations.” More immediately, the recent push by American evangelicals to move the America
the post-millennialism that undergirded much of nineteenth century liberal Protestantism: post-
millennialists held that human history was moving in an inevitable and progressive arc toward
the Kingdom of God—and human action could speed its coming—after which Christ would
come in the Last Days prophesied in the book of Revelation.)

Leaning heavily on such prophetic texts, Darby and the Plymouth Brethren had outlined a
dispensationalist hermeneutic that recast the entire biblical narrative as a cosmic struggle whose
past and future battles could be precisely plotted. That precision was crucial. As Pietsch argues,
it was the affordance of that hermeneutic to the quantifying, classifying, “taxonomic mind” that
made it so attractive to ministers and laypeople alike. The promise of such methodologically
certified certainty drew many ministers to the Niagara Bible Conference and the International
Prophecy Conference that were first organized in 1876 and 1878, respectively, and which met
regularly for decades, spawning in turn other such non-denominational conferences to meet
demand for new hermeneutics. Attendees learned that the Bible could be explained by a
rigorous classification of thematically linked passages, which could be counted and charted in
forms both aesthetically compelling and schematically precise (see fig. 1).

Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, carried out by the Trump administration, is steeped in a
pre-millennial reading of biblical prophecy which casts the modern nation-state of Israel as both the
setting for and a character in a cosmic struggle between God and Satan which will culminate in the
Second Coming of Christ.
Using typological resonances between the Old and New Testaments, dispensationalist readers could swiftly and conclusively connect apparently disparate passages; at the same time, careful distinctions were to be drawn between seductively similar phrases. C.I. Scofield (whose 1909 Scofield Reference Bible is to this day the all-time bestselling title published by Oxford University Press) discriminated between “the kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of heaven” and between references to the Holy Spirit according to the preposition that preceded it: in the Holy Ghost, with the Holy Ghost, etc.86 The results of these practices are far too complex to reproduce here. What matters for our purposes is that those results were produced

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86 Marsden, 60.
by the kinds of practices that had currency in late nineteenth century American culture precisely because they were able to buttress their users’ confidence in their knowledge—a confidence that common sense could no longer adequately provide.

Was this Biblical literalism, as liberal opponents claimed? Dispensationalists did prize the literal meaning of words in the Bible, but this was never a singular, flat relationship between words and meaning: even the most adamant defenders of the literal meaning of scripture believed that the Bible contained multiple kinds of language with multiple valences. Literal reading could, and did, include figuration and allegory. But it excluded the liberal or historicist interpretation of prophetic language that neutered its claims about the future, and it foreclosed the possibility of indecision, which would have threatened the dispensationalists’ most important claim: to precision.

More to the point, the meaning of the Bible for dispensationalists resided not in words, and not even in “facts” as it had for their common sense forebears. Meaning resided in the relations between the Bible’s formal elements: words, phrases, numbers, types. And in another important contrast with the common sense hermeneutic, those relations were not self-evident: the Bible’s manifold parts still needed to be sorted out and their relations charted according to specialized methods that aspired to the rigorous standard of contemporary science. The Bible was a terribly complex machine whose revelation was to be understood through the diagrammatic unfolding of its internal interrelations.

Prophecy conferences and the dispensational system they propagated responded to a felt need for new methods of producing confident belief. They quickly came to serve a second function, however: they were sites where clergy could buttress their claim to interpretive

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87 See Pietsch, ch. 5, esp. 119ff. Marsden described dispensationalism as approach to scripture as “an encyclopedic puzzle” (58).
expertise as the structure of religious authority was also changing around them. Biblical interpretation, once their prerogative and purview, was being professionalized. Independent of the threat that the historicist methods posed to an inspired Bible, the mere existence of “Biblical Studies” and its claim to specialized knowledge (of original languages, of methods of textual criticism, etc.) implied for ministers a demotion in their status as professionals and experts.88 Given the anxiety provoked by the rapidly changing circumstances of ministry, it is perhaps unsurprising that those who attended dispensationalist Bible conferences quickly became self-conscious of their location outside the developing institutional structures of specialist knowledge production. Pietsch notes how rapidly that change occurred. At the inaugural International Prophecy Conference in 1878, there was little hostility to the higher criticism or liberal “New” theologians like Henry Ward Beecher or Newman Smyth. The attendees saw themselves not as a fringe movement, but as “concerned custodians of mainstream Protestant ideas and clerical authority.”89 By the 1886 Bible Conference in Chicago, however, the dispensationalists had assumed a more bellicose posture and assumed the model of scholarship that distinguished their enemy.

“As part of the task of disciplinary professionalization, conference speakers believed they had a duty to police the methodological and conceptual borders of their discipline. …[M]ost of this debate took place in scholarly language and techniques. References were amassed, jargon was marshaled, logic was commanded, and premillennialists charged into battle behind a phalanx of experts and credentials.”90

These conferences gave these ministers a place to network professionally, an alternative form of intellectual status, and new forms of technical expertise they could teach to—or perform before—their congregants.

88 Pietsch, 44.
89 Pietsch, 50.
90 Pietsch, 67.
Premillennial dispensationalism has often been understood as an elaborate retrenchment of common sense epistemology. Perhaps desirous of the Princeton theologians’ confidence, several prominent dispensationalists indeed presented themselves as heirs to that tradition. Echoing Torrey and other contributors to *The Fundamentals*, the prolific dispensationalist speaker and writer A.T. Pierson derided liberal hermeneutics as corrupted by an anti-supernatural bias: he told an audience at the 1895 Prophets Conference in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, “I like Biblical theology that does not start with the superficial Aristotelian method of reason, that does not begin with an hypothesis, and then warp the facts and the philosophy to fit the crook of our dogma, but a Baconian system, which first gathers the teachings of the word of God, and then seeks to deduce some general law upon which the facts can be arranged.” Yet despite their rhetoric, in practice these conservatives had committed to innovative specialized methods whose necessity was itself proof that the epistemological holism of common sense had collapsed.

These innovative conservatives had wanted, in part, to recover a world defined by God’s revelation in the Bible and in nature: a world in which God was legibly present in all things. Yet in the attempt to legitimize the Biblical revelation, they created a radically self-enclosed book whose divine authority was legible in the density of its internal interrelationships. The interleaving of divine and human intention fell away: God had not worked through intuitive and universal modes of human knowledge; God’s revelation required specialized methods for its discovery. As we have seen with the dispensationalists and here with Torrey, the inerrant Bible was an accommodation to terms that these biblical conservatives ultimately wanted to refuse.

Inerrancy was the doctrinal premise upon which they claimed that study of the Bible could

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91 Pietsch and Gloege both criticize this in Marsden.
92 “The Coming of the Lord: The Doctrinal Center of the Bible,” *Addresses on the Second Coming of the Lord: Delivered at the Prophets Conference, Allegheny, Pa., December 3-6, 1895* (Pittsburgh, 1895): p. 82; quoted in Marsden, 55:
produce precise, taxonomic, and “objective” knowledge, over against the sentimental and subjective relativism of liberal scholars. These conservatives thus granted the basic premise of their liberal Protestant opponents: that it was not what you believed, but how you believed. Their practice demonstrated that one could no longer simply trust in one’s reading of the Bible on the grounds of common sense or perspicuity; confidence in the Bible’s truth could be reliably produced only by recognizably modern methods.

What unites Torrey and the pre-millennial dispensationalists of the Niagara Conference was their innovative response to the rise of historicist hermeneutics and their installation within a new site of religious authority: the research university. I have tried to provide an account of the changes in their methods and in their development of an inerrant Bible which could be analyzed with modern methods of confident knowledge-production, methods that would nonetheless reveal that Bible to have an authority that would ultimately supervene the authority of historicist methods. With respect to their goal of restoring the Bible to its former place of cultural and political authority, we can say that those efforts did not achieve the success they had hope for. Yet it provides a model of conservative innovation that can clarify the success of a similarly self-enclosed infinitely complex and self-authorizing text in literary studies, and the cost of that success.

iii.

Like many biblical conservatives, Ransom departed from the premise that there was a holistic epistemology that was under threat in the modern world. And like those Bible-readers, Ransom and his followers developed an innovative hermeneutic that would both recall that holism and make it legitimate as an object of modern and specialized knowledge—an object
whose study would belong among the specialized disciplines of the university. Yet it is important
to state clearly that the theological point of departure for “New Critical” literary hermeneutics
could not have been more different from that of the “fundamentalists.” Ransom, the godfather of
the movement, was a dyed-in-the-wool Protestant modernist.

“Poetic knowledge” was John Crowe Ransom’s career-long obsession. Poetry restored
human beings to a condition of wonder and dependence upon nature; it restored human beings to
a state of rightful humility before nature’s vastness, power and contingency. Poetry satisfied the
human hunger for “a sense of what the world-stuff really is” in its qualitative density, its
limitless diversity, and its rich texture.93 Ransom conceived of poetry as an attempt at knowledge
of the world in its infinite particularity and as an end in itself: “The way to obtain the true
Dinglichkeit of a formal dinner or a landscape or a beloved person is to approach the object as
such, and in humility; then it unfolds a nature which we are unprepared for if we have put our
trust in the simple idea which attempted to represent it.”94 Ransom explicitly placed poetic
knowledge at the foundation of religion. “Religion is an order of experience under which we
indulge the compound attitude of fear, respect, enjoyment, and love for the external nature in the
midst of which we are forced to live.”95 That external nature was understood in a properly
religious way as “the body and manifestation of an inscrutable God, whose name shall mean: Of
a fullness of being that exceeds formulation.”96 And it was the poet “and nobody else” who gave

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93 Ransom to Kenneth Burke, August 8, 1941, quoted in David Tell, “Burke’s Encounter With
Ransom: Rhetoric and Epistemology in ‘Four Master Tropes,’” Rhetoric Society Quarterly 34.4 (2004):
33-54; 39.
94 “Poetry: A Note on Ontology,” TWB, 124.
95 GWT, 136.
96 GWT, 68.
that body to that God, which, if there were not poetic impulse to actualize or ‘find’ Him, would remain the driest and deadest among Platonic ideas.”

This theological position is thoroughly modern: it is entirely continuous with the modernist position Schleiermacher outlined in On Religion. Religion is not defined by doctrine or ritual, but by a mode of experience: an embodied, intuitive, and immersive relationship to “the infinite nature of totality,” the universe conceived as “the one and all” that exceeded propositional statement.

Reading Ransom, the most consistent characteristic of poetic knowledge—and the religion that it grounds—is its defensive posture. For this humble and attentive submission to the world was continually assaulted by science. “What we cannot know constitutionally as scientists is the world which is made of whole and indefeasible objects, and this is the world which poetry recovers for us.” Science was Ransom’s broad term for rationalist and pragmatic disciplines that aimed at making the world understandable and available for use. “To that extent they may seem disinterested and innocent,” but the knowledge they produced inevitably reduced natural phenomena to abstractions and generalizations; these sciences also aimed, “perhaps slyly and half-consciously at first, and then greedily and openly as soon as they can, at reducing them to human prediction and control.” This view informed Ransom’s steady conviction that only poetic knowledge was truly disinterested and objective. Whatever claims had been made about the impersonality and replicability of its experiments, science approached the world with a commitment to certain pre-established, utilitarian interests that inevitably reduced objects in the

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97 “Poetry: a Note on Ontology,” TWB, 140.
99 TWB, x-xi.
100 GWT: 23.
world according to those interests. Science stripped natural phenomena of their aura of the infinite, the glory of their variety and particularity, and made them merely instrumental to projects of human hubris.

Across his career, Ransom engaged several different strategies in the defense of poetic knowledge against the reductions of modern science and the industrial capitalism that exploited its discoveries. The first of these was the famous defense of the Southern Agrarian tradition that Ransom mounted as the organizer and editor of *I’ll Take My Stand*. Published in 1930, that work of political nostalgia advocated a return to the plantation economy of the Old South in the face of accelerating industrialization. For the antebellum farmer, dependent on one particular “spot of ground” for his livelihood and thus tied to it spiritually, had known nature poetically. “He would till it not too hurriedly and not too mechanically to observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness.” Ransom and his co-authors were virulently anti-communist, but still assumed a relationship between the economic base and the cultural superstructure: in either willful ignorance or bad faith, however, they elided the actual economic engine of their antebellum idyll—chattel slavery. Generically, however, *I’ll Take My Stand* was a straightforward political proclamation, a manifesto that clearly articulated a critique of industrial capitalism from
the right and proposed an alternative, however unworkable: “a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way.” More important for the purposes of this chapter, however, was Ransom’s taste for more counterintuitive tactics in his defense of poetic knowledge.

That taste was announced in the title of Ransom’s first single-author prose work, also published in 1930. *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy.* It was a *theological* defense of poetic knowledge: a defense of religion as the historical provenance of such knowledge. Orthodoxy, for Ransom, signified a form of religiosity that honored the contingent and awesomely alien power of nature and the inevitably tragic end of any attempt to project a rational or merely human order onto the natural order. Departing from this recognizably modernist premise, however, Ransom offered a somewhat surprising prescription. Modern persons should forsake the idols of progress and efficiency and return to the worship of the Old Testament God, “the stern and inscrutable God of Israel.” “Orthodoxy,” for Ransom, meant taking seriously the myth by which the ancient Israelites had accommodated themselves to this natural order that always exceeded human knowledge and control.

As we have seen, Ransom was not alone in his dissatisfaction with a liberal Christianity that had domesticated this God into a cheerleader for social and technological progress. He desired a faith with a harder edge. That was one axis of alignment with his “fundamentalist” contemporaries. But what was truly unorthodox was Ransom’s blunt pragmatism. He praised his

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105 “Introduction: A Statement of Principles,” *I’ll Take My Stand*, xix. Ransom was the author of this introductory section and the collection’s first essay which immediately followed it.

106 “The predicament of religionists today may be stated as follows: they have not much more to lose. But it is possible that there is something which might yet, by new tactics, be won back” (*GWT*, x, emphasis mine).

107 Ransom reminded his readers that such peoples “are almost inevitably agrarians rather than industrialists—they find a God readily when they make contact with the elemental soil, and with more difficulty as their habitations and occupations increase in artificiality and in distance from the soil” (*GWT*, 124).
contemporaries who indeed believed in this God, the omnipotent and undomesticated God who would come at the end of time to separate the sheep from the goats. Yet Ransom, ironic and world-weary, made it clear that he was an observer of this tradition, not a member of it; a critic and admirer of “Oriental” myths, not a “believer.” “I believe,” he wrote, “that religious myths, including those of the Bible, are unhistorical and unscientific, precisely as our gallant historians and higher critics have recently discovered; but that their unhistorical and unscientific character is not their vice but their excellence, and that it certainly was their intent.” Their excellence inhered not in their truth, but in their efficacy. Ransom’s position was that one should believe in these myths as a technology for achieving poetic knowledge of the world in its fullness—the fullness that science assaults with its generalizations and abstractions. In effect, Ransom’s advocacy for “orthodoxy”—an anti-instrumental humility before the universe—was itself an instrument, a weapon against materialism.

What most concerns us here, however, is Ransom’s agitation on behalf of poetic knowledge within the emergent discipline of English in the American university. Though Ransom himself was a Professor of English at Vanderbilt (1914-37) and then later at Kenyon College (1937-59), “professors” of English were the target of his institutional polemic. For most of these literary professionals were disappointments to Ransom. The terms of that disappointment will be familiar to us from the conservative attack on the higher criticism. Ransom disparaged the work of literary historians—or “scholars,” as he called them in scolding scare quotes: they were content to produce knowledge about the historical and cultural situation of a text’s production, but rarely ventured into a consideration of the work itself. University

108 GWT, 55.
109 What’s unsatisfactory here is that Ransom, for all his desire for concrete particulars, gives none here regarding the nature of the world that poetic knowledge revealed, other than it is. He gives us no concrete means by which to decide if we would want to live there. What would we gain for living in such a world? What would we have to give up?
students deserved to study literature, “and not merely about literature.” He was also sharply critical of the moralism of the New Humanism and, for the same reasons, Marxist criticism. These readers were interested in literature neither as a gateway into a world of “whole and indefeasible objects” nor in literary works as examples of such objects; rather they read every literary work through the same reductive lens of how humans ought to nobly live or how economic conditions distorted their self-consciousness and their social relationships. Under such leadership, Ransom offered, the discipline of literary study might as well declare itself “as a branch of the department of history, with the option of declaring itself occasionally a branch of the department of ethics.”

If Ransom’s overall critical project was to discipline readers to seek poetic knowledge, the essay “Criticism, Inc.” addressed the structural conditions under which that knowledge could be made legible and legitimate within the public sphere. Ransom argued first that literary criticism should make its home within the disciplinary structure of the modern research university. Specifically, literary “critics” should supplant the incumbent “professors” and “scholars” whose work Ransom disdained as ancillary to the study of literature itself. Secondly, in so doing, critics would elevate departments of English to the status of a modern discipline alongside “economics, chemistry, sociology, theology and architecture,” for “[i]n these branches it is taken for granted that criticism of the performance is the prerogative of men who have had formal training in its theory and technique.”

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110 *TWB*, 330.
111 *ibid*, 335.
112 The poem, Ransom insisted, “is an artistic object, with a heroic human labor behind it, and on these terms it calls for public discussion.” *TWB*, 342.
114 *TWB*, 337.
discipline “more scientific, or precise and systematic.”¹¹⁵ We recall Ransom’s penchant for counterintuituitive tactics in the defense of poetic knowledge: Ransom was arguing that literary criticism would best achieve its goal of honoring poetic knowledge and protecting it from scientific interests by becoming a science itself.

What kinds of studies of poetry did Ransom desire this new science to produce? Technical studies. But one notes, as Ransom enumerates what he means by “technical,” that he projects his ontological dichotomy of poetic and scientific knowledge onto the generic distinction between “poetry” and “prose.”

“They would be technical studies of poetry, for instance, the art I am specifically discussing, if they treated its metric; its inversions, solecisms, lapses from the prose norm of language, and from close prose logic; its tropes; its fictions, or inventions, by which it secures ‘aesthetic distance’ and removes itself from history; or any other devices, on the general understanding that any systematic usage which does not hold good for prose is a poetic device. […] Poetry distinguishes itself from prose on the technical side by the devices which are, precisely, its means of escaping from prose. Something is continually being killed by prose which the poet wants to preserve.”¹¹⁶

By virtue of its formal complexity, a poem offers access to an order of experience that exceeds any reduction to propositional statement or instrumental use. Yet we note two related ironies. The first recalls our brief discussion of God Without Thunder. Ransom describes poetry—which is supposed to be a relation to the world devoid of instrumental interests—precisely as that which is valuable for what it can do: it secures “aesthetic distance” from history; it preserves that which prose logics would devour. The second is that poetry can only be defined negatively against the “prose norm.” There is “something” alive in poetry that prose—unsubtly aligned with the appetites of science—cannot help but destroy. What that something is can never be stated.

¹¹⁵ TWB, 329. “More scientific, or precise and systematic.” The awkward qualification involved in that “or” can be read as a measure of Ransom’s intellectual honesty: on some level he knew that he was trading on the cachet of rigorous, disinterested inquiry in the service of his own particular interest—the legitimation of poetic knowledge.

¹¹⁶ TWB, 347.
That is not to say, however, that its existence must be taken on faith. For in the context of Ransom’s argument, it is precisely the function of the new, professionalized class of literary critics to uncover the devices by which that “something” continually eludes them. That is the premise their criticism “proves.”

The critic should regard the poem as nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre. The poet himself, in the agony of composition, has something like this sense of his labors. The poet perpetuates in his poem an order of existence which in actual life is constantly crumbling beneath his touch. His poem celebrates the object which is real, individual, and qualitatively infinite. He knows that his practical interests will reduce this living object to a mere utility, and that his sciences will disintegrate it for their convenience into their respective abstracts. The poet wishes to defend his object’s existence against its enemies, and the critic wishes to know what he is doing, and how. The critic should find in the poem a total poetic or individual object which tends to be universalized, but is not permitted to suffer this fate.117

Ransom imagined critics as empiricists whose painstaking analysis would disclose the ontological irreducibility of the poem and, by extension, the “poetic knowledge” that it alone could offer. The rigor and precision of science served Ransom’s larger project of inexhaustible praise for that which transcends its ken.118 Its function was to fail.119

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“The critic should find in the poem a total poetic or individual object…” In the context of this above passage, Ransom means that poetry provides access to things in their infinite dinglichkeit. The poem’s meaning is to be sought in its correspondence to a reality beyond itself;

117 “Criticism, Inc.,” TWB, 348.
118 It is notable that a recent anthology of essays by Ransom and his followers is entitled Praising it New: The Best of the New Criticism, ed. Garrick Davis (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 2008).
119 On this point, Graff quotes Hazard Adams, who wrote that the New Criticism made critics into Byronic anti-heroes. “There is an ineradicable Romantic irony in the enterprise of criticism. Like the quest of the Byronic hero, it is endless and yet at the same time valuable—endless because the terms are finally self-defeating, and valuable because in its own inadequacy it calls attention to the greater adequacy of the poem itself, which manages to say or be more than remarks about it can ever say. For this reason it is possible to characterize criticism as fundamentally negative. It is always denying the adequacy of any critical statement and constantly urging us to look again.” The Interests of Criticism: An Introduction to Literary Theory (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), 141; cited in Graff, Literature Against Itself, 144.
a plenum that the poem “defends…against its enemies” in disintegrating, abstracting science. Yet in the passage we considered immediately prior, Ransom shades into a different kind of statement: it is the poem itself that is the infinite object that must be defended against reduction and instrumentalization. This subtly but crucially changes the valence of the formalist studies that Ransom is proposing. If the poem celebrates an object, its technique is in service of rendering the object in its fullness—a fullness that stands as a rebuke to the “scientific” knowledge of that object that has greater currency in the capitalist episteme. By describing and analyzing the poem’s formal complexities, critics collude with the poet to keep that object whole and in view. They carry on Ransom’s larger mission of contesting the spiritual vacuity of positivism within the university where Ransom succeeded in establishing criticism’s institutional seat. If, however, the critic adopts the metaphysical premise that the poem is itself the infinite object, the task of formalist analysis is to prove that the complexity of the poem’s internal relationships is irreducible to any “prose” statement. The meaning of the poem ceases to be in its reference to a reality beyond itself; the meaning of the poem comes to inhere in the coherence and completion of its own being. The poem ceases to be an intentional object and becoming akin to a natural object. There is no longer a poet to collude with in safeguarding the aesthetic object the poem celebrates; there are only critics who heroically safeguard the poem from more local, intimate “enemies:” the “professors” of literary history, the belle-lettists, and the moralists who would instrumentalize the poem as data for their own pet projects. And these “new” critics would do so with a rhetoric of rigorous empiricism that made these local enemies appear subjective and sentimental—very nineteenth century—by comparison.

What was the function of the slippage back and forth between these two concepts of the poem and the formalist hermeneutics that attend them? One answer: to gain and maintain a
foothold for Ransom’s project of contesting modern knowledge within the privileged institutional site of its production. Recalling *I’ll Take My Stand* and *God Without Thunder*, we might say that Ransom’s point of departure was “poetic knowledge” and his investment in the poem as a self-enclosed object deserving infinitely close attention (in “Criticism, Inc.”) emerged out of a practical strategy for making poetic knowledge the pursuit of an academic discipline. Turning to Ransom’s student Cleanth Brooks, we can see this slippage from another angle, and see the cost of its success.

Brooks’ point of departure was the poem’s coherence. In “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” Brooks developed his theory of poetry as drama: he defined poetry as a “pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonizations, developed through a temporal scheme.” More like a ballet than a treatise, the form of the poem builds dissonance and conflict into the working out of its material; these tensions are then resolved into a harmony whose achievement is irreducible to an abstract idea or a propositional statement. The “content” of the poem’s resolution is inextricably joined to the form the poem takes in achieving that resolution in time. This was closely tied to Brooks’ insistence that all great poetry was characterized by irony. “Irony is the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context.” As Brooks clarified in an appendix, any part of the poem—even what is felt to be its core or crux—is to be judged “only in terms of its relation to the total effect of the poem.”

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120 *WWU*, 203.
121 The unity of a poem, Brooks writes, “is not a unity of the sort to be achieved by the reduction and simplification appropriate to an algebraic formula. It is a positive unity, not a negative; it represents not a residue but an achieved harmony” (*WWU*, 195).
122 *WWU*, 210.
123 *WWU*, 254. Where did that effect register? The obvious answer would be “in the reader.” That was the answer offered by I.A. Richards. In his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Richards attempted to turn the critical conversation away from the qualities of aesthetic objects and towards the effects that they
or phrase in a poem involves the identification of how that part of the poem is qualified by its local context (the surrounding sounds and signs that qualify its connotation) and by the broadest context allowable—by the poem as a whole. The interpretation of a poem involves a demonstration of how that total effect is produced by the dynamic interrelationships of the poem’s parts. Complete knowledge of the poem is always produced in this hermeneutic circle. Each part informs our understanding of the whole, and our understanding of the parts is continually being revised as we gain a more complete conception of the whole.

The coherence model of interpretation can be described as a discipline in which certain part-whole relationships are prescribed and others are proscribed. Brooks insists on the continual qualification of the part by the whole and the whole by the part; the meaning of each is inextricable from the other. This is what Brooks means by a poem being “organic.” Its many generated in their audiences. “We are accustomed to say that a picture is beautiful, instead of saying that it causes in us an experience which is valuable in certain ways.” Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950): 20. For Richards, those effects were not limited to a hieratic, Kantian realm of the aesthetic. Poems engaged the practical faculties of readers; poems were in fact a technology that developed one's capacity for pleasure, for the analysis and understanding of complex phenomena. Poetry was “a means of ordering our minds.” Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment (New York: Harvest / Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1929): 327. It followed that criticism had a pedagogical function, helping readers use poetry to enlarge these capacities so as to be able to achieve an internal equilibrium amidst the bewilderingly complex and often contradictory stimuli that constitute human life. The method of close reading that Richards developed and whose results he published in Practical Criticism was an experiment to establish a baseline of relations between poems and actual readers. It was the starting point for the development of a method that would more effectively train readers in the skills, aptitudes, and sensitivities that practical and aesthetic experience both required. As Joseph North has argued, “the effect of Richards's work here was to put literary criticism, considered as an active attempt to use literature as a tool of aesthetic education for the improvement of people's lives, on something like the scientific footing required in order to qualify it as a discipline within the modern research university, alongside--and even sometimes in competition with--literary scholarship, philology, literary history.” Joseph North, “What’s ‘New Critical’ about ‘Close Reading’? I.A. Richards and His New Critical Reception,” New Literary History 44.1 (Winter 2013): 141-57,146. As North continues, however, once this practice crossed the Atlantic and was taken up by Brooks, Ransom, and their colleagues, “‘close reading’ was to become a very different thing.” Yet Brooks forecloses that affective or formative possibility.

124 The most famous statement of this circle comes from Schleiermacher: “each particular can only be understood via the general, of which it is a part, and vice versa.” Hermeneutics and Criticism, ed. Bowie, 24. It is worth noting that Schleiermacher claimed “every piece of knowledge is only scientific if it is formed in this way.” The legibility of criticism in the terms of science was not important to Brooks, but it was to Ransom, as we have seen, as it will be to W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley.
constituent parts are organized into a functional unity, as roots or blossoms are integral to the being of a tree. (Elaborating that metaphor in his essay on Yeats’ “Among School Children,” Brooks writes that any reader “can discover, to be sure, propositions which seem to characterize, more or less accurately, the unifying attitude. But if we take such propositions to be the core of the poem we are contenting ourselves with reductions and substitutions. To do this, is to take the root or the blossoms of the tree for the tree itself.”) In other words, Brooks’s coherence model of interpreting poetry forbids an alternative relationship between part and whole: synecdoche. No part of the poem can stand for the poem. Nor can any propositional statement about the poem stand in for the poem in its fullness.

Towards the conclusion of the essay, however, spurred to contrast poetic and scientific language, Brooks makes a leap to a different kind of claim about the meaning and value of poetry. And in that leap synecdoche plays quite an important role.

“It is not enough for the poet to analyse his experience as the scientist does, breaking it up into parts, distinguishing part from part, classifying the various parts. His task is finally to unify experience. He must return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience. The poem, if it be a true poem is a simulacrum of reality—in this sense, at least, it is an ‘imitation’—by being an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience.”

Brooks was less rhetorically hostile to science than Ransom, but he shared the basic premise that scientific knowledge was atomizing and reductive. Scientific language, Brooks held, is primarily

125 *WWU*, 191.
126 In a recent essay, Jay Jin has argued that the disciplinary practice recognized in English departments as “close reading” is a discipline of synecdoche. Close reading is the performance of the reader’s capacity “to scale from any amount of evidence (a word, a line, a sonnet) to any level of interpretation (the poem, poetry in the nineteenth century, poetic language in general).” “Problems of Scale in ‘Close’ and ‘Distant’ Reading,” *Philological Quarterly* 96.1 (2017): 105-29; 106. Jin notes that none of the figures we now identify as New Critics used this phrase in this concrete sense, but also rightly identifies the strong link between those critics and the practice that many scholars see as definitive of the discipline—regardless of their position vis-à-vis the reading practices of the New Critics themselves. What I want to explore is the particular synecdochic relations that Brooks and Ransom allow and disallow in the coherence model and the correspondence model, and how synecdoche allowed Brooks and Ransom to knit these two models together.
127 *WWU*, 213.
denotative; its terms are defined and then applied analytically to the world. “But where is the
dictionary which contains the terms of a poem?” For poetic language is not primarily denotative;
its terms, as we now know well, are continually being prepared and revised by its context: “the
word, as the poet uses it, has to be conceived of, not as a discrete particle of meaning, but as a
potential of meaning, a nexus or cluster of meanings.”

Yet it was paradoxically by virtue of this ascribed coherence and self-sufficiency that the
poem—as a whole—could take on synecdochic significance. The poem serves as a synecdoche
for a reality that is also irreducibly and organically whole, an order of experience that scientific
rationalism continually reduces to fixed propositions, mere knowledge. As Brooks subtly
acknowledges, this is an unorthodox mimetic theory of art: “in this sense, at least, it is an
‘imitation.’” Poetry does not reproduce the content of experience: the natural world and the
flawed characters who shape and damage it. Poetry reproduces the form of experience as it was
constructed by Schleiermacher and his Romantic peers—an intuitive unity that by definition
exceeds propositional statement.

In the opening of “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” it was necessary to closely attend to the
apparently contradictory and conflicting elements in a difficult poem because the meaning of a
poem inhered in the singular effect produced by the achieved harmony of all these parts: literary
historians, psychologizing impressionists and New Humanist moralizers did damage to poems by
reading them for an upshot. Such paraphrase was by definition misprision. The poem did not
speak to anything except itself. Here, at the conclusion of the essay, however, when poetry put

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128 WWU, 210. Brooks was certainly comfortable with explicitly synecdochic thinking—he proceeds
immediately from this assertion to argue, “What is true of the poet’s language in detail is true of the larger
wholes of poetry.” The meaning of poetry can never be fixed denotatively, can never be reduced to a
rational statement. For those who would want the language of a poem to tell us something about the
world, its statements must always appear warped by the context, as a stick in a pool of water appears bent.
“Indeed, whatever the statement, it will always show itself as deflected away from a positive,
straightforward formulation” (WWU, 211).
into implicit competition with the truths of science, Brooks subtly slips from a theory of poetry as a maximally coherent object to a theory of poetry as communicating unique knowledge of the world. As this new opponent comes into focus, Brooks shifts his tactics. Close attention to poetry is now necessary because the poem’s harmony of ironies and contradictions is a synecdoche for “experience as man knows it in his own experience”—which by Brooks’ definition exceeds any scientific statement about that experience.

Brooks’ work testifies that cost of this strategy, however, was the poem’s silence. For Brooks was forced to bracket the propositional statements that poems do make, and which do claim the status of truth. This ambivalence is most plain in Brooks’ essay on Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which centers on the problem posed by the final couplet spoken by the urn that the ode addresses: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” Brooks finds this odd: the poem hitherto insists that the urn’s beauty inheres precisely in its silence, in its capacity to “tease us out of thought,” in its access to that which exceeds our rational and philosophical faculties. And yet poem concludes with a quotation from the urn that one cannot help but read as a propositional statement: “This “is ‘to mean’ with a vengeance,” Brooks writes: “to violate the doctrine of the objective correlative, not only by stating truths, but by defining the limits of truth.” Such a statement invites evaluation on philosophical terms.

Brooks must protect statements like “Beauty is truth” from such judgment. Brooks argues that the phrase should be read as “a statement put in the mouth of a dramatic character and a

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130 WWU, 151-2. That is, Brooks understood Eliot to have rejected the Ode’s concluding statement as hinging because it violated the impersonal theory of poetry he advocated in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). In the next chapter, I argue that Eliot’s essay on Dante shows him grappling with the implications of that earlier theory in light of his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, and revising his earlier thinking in ways that diverge significantly from the way the American New Critics revised and extended his theory.
statement which is governed and qualified by the whole context of the play. It does not directly challenge an examination into its truth because its relevance is pointed up and modified by the dramatic context.”

In “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” that principle of dramatic propriety was the premise for a close attention to every word in its dynamic part in the poem’s resolution of its complex dissonances through time. Every word must be carefully heard, every part must be teased out and appreciated in its relation to the whole. Here, however, dramatic propriety here serves a limiting function: it establishes the kind of statements that are “proper” to poetry-as-drama, as well as the correlative forms of interpretation and inquiry that are proper to poems.

The poem, like the urn it addresses, is a “silent form” that communicates not by positive statement, but by “teasing us” into a form of experience that is beyond positive statement. The poem itself, Brooks argues, is such a “formed experience.”

Having renounced its claim to propositional truth, however, the poem declares that its own “proper” being as an aesthetic form (like that of the aesthetic form it celebrates) is a synecdoche of a perception of truth that exceeds positive statements. It is by virtue of its ontological coherence—not its communication—that the poem reveals a truth about the world that is more important than the truths produced by positivist science, philosophy, and history; it has access to a level of reality that these rational disciplines obscure. Brooks reads the final lines as the urn’s (and Keats’s) declaration that the imaginative insight of “formed experience” embodies the basic and fundamental perception of man and nature. The urn is beautiful, and yet its beauty is based—what else is the poem concerned with?—on an imaginative perception of essentials. Such a vision is beautiful but it is also true. The sylvan historian presents us with beautiful histories, but they are true histories, and it is a good historian.

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131 *WWU*, 154.
Moreover, the ‘truth’ which the sylvan historian gives is the only kind of truth which we are likely to get on this earth, and, furthermore, it is the only kind that we have to have. The names, dates, and special circumstances, the wealth of data—these the sylvan historian quietly ignores. But we shall never get all the facts anyway—there is no end to the accumulation of facts. Moreover, mere accumulations of facts—a point our own generation is only beginning to realize—are meaningless. The sylvan historian does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but also insight into essential truth. Its ‘history,’ in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth—not myth as a pretty but irrelevant make-believe, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality.  

Brooks makes a valid point about the incapacity of positivist disciplines to negotiate with the fact/value problem. No amount of accumulated data will suggest their own scheme of organization. “Facts” are not self-ordering. Yet note the pressure that Brooks puts on synecdoche immediately following to address that same problem. The urn, the artwork, “takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth.” Brooks frankly admits that art operates by a principle of exclusion; the poet or sculptor selects a set of descriptive details about the world and orders them into an aesthetically coherent whole. He then proceeds to argue that this whole tells us something about the all-inclusive order of nature. The point is not that this position is incoherent; the point is that the incoherence is functional: Brooks wants poetry to produce public and “valid” perceptions of reality without exposing those perceptions to challenge from the positivist disciplines it supposedly supersedes.

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132 *WWU*, 164.

133 To me, this seems like one of the strongest cases to be made against the pretentions of science and analytic philosophy; isn’t it odd, though, that Brooks invokes it only here, in passing? Isn’t it odd that this point is so clearly tertiary to his main polemic, which insists that poetry reveals the world as it is?

134 Note that Brooks wavers in his use of definite and indefinite articles in the first and last sentences of this block quote, as he also waffles with the object of poetry’s perception. At the start, Brooks contends that the aesthetic imagination offers “the basic and fundamental perception of man and nature.” The foundationalism of that perception is perhaps mitigated by the “of:” this is a perception mediated by “man,” in that “man” is both the subject and the object of the perception (although nature seems to be only an object of that perception). At the end of the passage quoted, however, he writes that art makes a myth, which is “a valid perception of reality.” He has ratcheted back to an indefinite article: this perception may well be one of many valid perceptions. Yet the object of that perception—“reality”—reads as an objective category, independent of human constructs. Brooks appears unwilling to commit to a consistent claim about the nature of poetic experience.
I noted above that in “The Heresy of Paraphrase” it was the comparison with scientific language that spurred Brooks to pivot from the coherence theory of poetic language to the grander claims of the Romantic theory of poetry as experience. In his essay on Keats’ ode, we see that move repeated, with an instructive modesty. “If the urn has been properly dramatized, if we have followed the development of the metaphors, if we have been alive to the paradoxes which work throughout the poem”—if, that is, the reader regards the poem as a coherent whole that is irreducible to synecdochic statement or commentary—“perhaps then, we shall be prepared for the enigmatic, final paradox which the ‘silent form’ utters:” that beauty is truth. If we as readers been “alive” to the nature of poetry as drama, “in that case, we shall not feel that the generalization, unqualified and to be taken literally, is meant to march out of its context to compete with the scientific and philosophical generalizations which dominate our world.” Art and poetry produce valid perceptions into reality, but the nature of that truth is delimited so as to be uncontestable by other disciplines. Even positive statements like “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” that Brooks himself would have hastened to approve are to be ensconced in context and so protected from fact-grubbing scientist and fault-finding philosophers. Again, it is only the form of the poem as a whole—as a “formed experience”—that contests the abstractions of positivism. Its protest must be silent.

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135 *WWU*, 165.  
136 In an appendix, Brooks suggested that poems should be judged according to their susceptibility to a “dramatic” reading. Poets and readers both were responsible for protecting the poem from “unreal competition” with philosophy, theology, and science (*WWU*, 201). “Certain statements, explicit or implied, because they are not properly assimilated to a total context, wrench themselves free from the context, and demand to be judged on ethical or religious grounds. The fault may, of course, lie either with the poet or the reader: the poet may fail by not dramatizing the statement; the reader may fail by ignoring the context and considering the statement out of context” (“The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition,” *WWU*, 253).
This chapter has been a study of conservative innovation. As the orthodox doctrines of an inspiration and perspicuity lost their ability to produce confident knowledge, conservative Bible readers developed a new, inerrant Bible that would be obtainable by the modes of precise and taxonomic knowledge that could produce confidence at the turn of the twentieth century. Such readers believed that rigorous observation, classification, and analysis could produce objective and solid truth out of the dense web of semantic connections within the text. These were also the methods upon which they moved to contest the installation of historicism as the privileged method of a new site of religious authority: the university. For not only was there no need to look beyond the boundaries of the text for meaning, such a search violated the university’s imperative to dispassionate and open inquiry. Liberal interpretation invariably reduced the Bible to the naturalist and historicist terms that liberal scholars had prejudicially chosen as the only valid form of modern knowledge. Conservatives proposed their close attention to the Biblical text itself as an alternative that would produce truly objective knowledge of the message the modern world so desperately needed to hear and understand: the Christian gospel.

The poem that Ransom and Brooks posited as their interpretive object emerged in response to similar epistemological and institutional pressures. Returning to the words of this chapter’s epigraph, they objected to the privilege of scholarship for which “miracles of all kinds are suspect, including the kind of miracle of which the poet speaks.” And they likewise took recourse to empiricist practices that would discredit that scholarship on its own terms, while also testifying to the irreducible wholeness of the poems they cherished and to the special capacity of poetry to recover a whole world of organic relationship.
There is much more work to be done to flesh out these parallel genealogies; there are many compelling connections and disjunctures between them to be discussed.\textsuperscript{137} In concluding this chapter, however, I want to reinforce one implicit commonality and draw one important distinction. To me, what these two movements share is a quasi-tragic irony. Both proposed a newly rigorous program of close reading in their attempts to defend or restore an organic epistemology against an ascendant “modernism”—a modernism characterized by an awareness that knowledge is only as authoritative as the method that produced it, and by a correlative skepticism toward the authority of traditions. What was conservative about both movements was the desire to approach the cherished text—the Bible or the poem—as the royal road into the center of a world designed for humans to know it in its fullness. Having taken on a polemic stance toward modernism and its exclusive claim to modern knowledge, however, both movements adopted the modernist insistence on method and drew their cherished texts out of the hermeneutic tradition that preceded them. Seeking a method that would legitimate their study of those texts as organic wholes, they had to abstract them from the world they were supposed to redeem.

These conservative Bible-readers and these “new” critics of poetry developed parallel strategies of legitimating their cherished texts within (and against) the modernist regime of knowledge-production, and those strategies involved hermeneutic innovations that were also parallel in their ambivalent results. There is a significant distinction to be drawn, however, and that returns us to the divergent theologies that undergirded these similar strategies. The goal of these conservative Bible-readers was to restore the public authority of the propositional truths

\textsuperscript{137} I am thinking first and foremost of the rhetoric of engineering and business that both movements draw on, not only for their connotation of precision and expertise, but, I would suggest, in an implicit attempt to align these conservative hermeneutics with institutions whose values are measurable, socially valorized, and independent of the university.
that comprised the Christian gospel. Their close textual hermeneutics and the inerrant Bible that emerged in dialectic with them were all geared toward the production of truths that would be incontrovertible—even by the findings of other modern disciplines. Ransom and Brooks bore no such burden. Indeed, as we have seen in Brooks’ anxious bracketing of Keats’ “beauty is truth, truth beauty”—a statement Brooks adamantly believed—close reading for these literary critics was precluded the possibility that poems would carry or communicate propositional truth. A poem communicated only its own self—silently. It synecdochally disclosed the reality of a world beyond propositional knowledge. Ransom and Brooks’ insistence on concreteness—on the facts—ironically served their apologia for a necessarily ineffable “poetic” knowledge.

This distinction may also clarify the divergent results of these two attacks on the authority of university scholars. By the 1920s, readers who sought to prove the propositional truth of an inerrant Bible were either denied positions in Biblical studies departments or they were slowly forced out of positions they already held.\textsuperscript{138} Theologians like Grescham Machen who remained rooted in a common sense tradition broke from institutions like Princeton Theological Seminary to form their own competing seminaries; pre-millennial dispensationalists, never having been admitted to such hallowed halls, continued to build their networks of conferences, and in turn founded institutions like Dallas Seminary and Bob Jones University.

Ransom and Brooks, however, succeeded in placing their own polemical program against modern knowledge production within the walls of the institution tasked with producing it. In contrast to their near-contemporaries the “fundamentalists,” their challenge to liberal scholarship achieved a great measure of institutional success. But the cost of this success was their

\textsuperscript{138} For Machen’s own description of his dissatisfaction with the rise of liberal theology at Princeton and elsewhere, see his \textit{Christianity and Liberalism} (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009 [1923]). For an informative historical account of the schism at PTS and in the broader Presbyterian context, see Bradley Longfield, \textit{The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
commitment to an emergent theory of poetry that could stake its challenge to modern science only to the extent that poems made no propositional statements that could be falsified by other disciplines.
T.S. Eliot’s Hermeneutic Conversion

How are we to understand T.S. Eliot’s conversion?¹ We may begin with the familiar terms, the terms Eliot established when he announced his conversion publicly in the brief preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes.*²

Had I wished to publish a volume of collected literary essays, this book would have been much bigger. The reader may be puzzled to know why I selected these articles and in this order. I wished to indicate certain lines of development and to dissociate myself from certain conclusions which have been drawn from my volume of essays, *The Sacred Wood.* …I have made bold to unite these occasional essays merely as an indication of what may be expected, and to refute any accusation of playing ’possum. The general

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¹ Eliot was baptized in secret by his friend and spiritual counselor William Force Stead and confirmed by the Bishop of Oxford in June 1927. On 15 March 1928 (Shrove Tuesday—the day before Ash Wednesday in the liturgical year), Eliot wrote to Stead that the sacrament had felt completed only recently, at the time of his first confession: having confessed, he wrote, “I…feel as if I had crossed a very wide and deep river: whether I get much farther or not, I feel very certain that I shall not cross back, and that in itself gives one a very extraordinary sense of surrender and gain.” *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Vol. 4: 1928-9,* eds. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012), 96. Hereafter L, followed by volume and page number.

² *For Lancelot Andrewes* marked a self-conscious pivot in Eliot’s critical career: it confirmed the turn Eliot had been making gradually since the early 1920s—away from his position that the role of literary criticism was to produce facts about texts. In other words, it was a turn away from the model of criticism that had inspired Brooks, Ransom, and the broader movement of “New” Criticism that I treated in the last chapter. In his 1923 essay “The Function of Criticism,” Eliot argued that the critic had use of two tools—comparison and analysis—in interpreting a text: such an interpretation was only valid, however, when it was “not in interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he otherwise would have missed.” *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: vol ii,* ed. Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 465. Hereafter CPCE, with volume and page number. By 1926, however, Eliot was had changed tack: “The significance of the term critic has varied indefinitely: in our time the most vigorous critical minds are philosophical minds, are, in short, creative of values” (“Mr. Read and M. Fernandez,” *CPCE* ii: 834, emphasis mine). As David Goldie has pointed out, this and other changes in Eliot’s conception of criticism emerged in a productively polemical exchange with John Middleton Murry that lasted from 1923 to 1927; both of the essays quoted are written in response to Murry’s defense of a romanticist criticism that seeks the truth of the text in the critic’s attention to the “Inner Voice.” *The Critical Difference: T.S. Eliot and John Middleton Murry 1919-1928* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-
catholic in religion. I am quite aware that the first term is completely vague, and easily
lends itself to clap-trap; I am aware that the second term is at present without definition,
and easily lends itself to what is almost worse than clap-trap, I mean temperate
conservatism; the third term does not rest with me to define.³

This is accurate with regard to the essays: “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-
catholic in religion” accurately describes the essays’ “point of view.” Touching on figures as
diverse as the 17th century preacher Andrewes, Machiavelli, Baudelaire, F.H. Bradley and Irving
Babbitt, *For Lancelot Andrews* was an attack on liberalism’s philosophical and political
premises. The essays deflated the reputations of those who trusted in the spiritual autonomy of
individuals; they lionized European writers who assumed the basic brokenness of human nature
and affirmed the need for traditional institutions to cultivate political order, spiritual discipline,
and moral formation. Yet this quotable slogan has come to stand as a settled statement of Eliot’s
permanent convictions. Such a reading obscures the ambivalence that defined Eliot’s conversion,
an ambivalence legible even in the limited context of the preface itself.⁴

Eliot claimed political, religious, and aesthetic positions that all valorized transcendent
authority and historical stability, but managed to dodge the question of the authority these
institutions held over *him*. Each position was an adjectival marker to a “point of view,” a point of
view over which he nonetheless appeared sovereign. Was he announcing his submission to these
authorities as a fallible and capricious creature, as he had privately?⁵ Or was he here in public

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³ “Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*,” *CPCE* iii: 513.
⁴ Eliot came to regret the confident and quotable concision of his announcement. In 1933 He wrote to
his brother on 1 January 1936, perhaps somewhat disingenuously: “I had no suspicion that the [the
preface] would be so thumbed and quoted as it was.” Quoted also in *CPCE* iii: 514, n.3 His regret seems
to have been permanent, though softened in time by humor: in a 1961 lecture given at the University of
Leeds, he wrote, “I ought to have foreseen that so quotable a sentence would follow me through life.” *To
⁵ Eliot wrote to Stead on 10 April 1928, a propos of his search for a spiritual director, “I feel that I
need the most severe…the most Latin, kind of discipline, Ignatian or other. It is a question of
compensation. I feel that nothing could be too ascetic, too violent, for my own needs” (*L4*, 128).
perversely assuming the authority to endorse them? Eliot anticipated his readers’ demand for more precise definitions, but he distanced himself from available definitions (“I am quite aware…”) without providing positive alternatives. His supervening authorities remained vague outlines.

What’s more, though writing “to refute any accusation of playing ’possum,” Eliot also kept up some of his old tricks of tone. Mixing high and low registers, calling out clap-trap and “dissociating” himself from “certain conclusions,” Eliot’s coming “out into the open” proved a performance at once disarmingly colloquial and elusively arch. In this most notorious passage of self-disclosure, Eliot played ’possum around the definitive tension of his spiritual life—and his life as a literary and cultural critic. Would he surrender—really? Eliot was announcing his submission to the transformative discipline of the Anglo-Catholic tradition, and yet in the act of announcing this change, he recouped familiar rhetorical practices that covertly asserted his

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7 Eliot later recounted that he wrote the preface after having been provoked by his former mentor Irving Babbitt, who pointedly suggested he “come out into the open” with his conversion. “I wrote that unlucky preface…nettled by Babbitt’s suggestion that I was being secretive.” Letter to his brother, 1 January 1936; quoted also in CPCE iii: 514, n.3.

8 There was also the question of whether or not Eliot’s conversion involved a repudiation of his prior work. Eliot neatly sidestepped that question also, displacing attention onto unspecified but surely mistaken “conclusions” drawn by readers of The Sacred Wood: it was these misreadings from which he wanted to “dissociate” himself. In the preface to the second edition of The Sacred Wood, also published in 1928, Eliot clarified his position vis-à-vis his most influential prose work: taking up the text again, he wrote, “I discovered that what had happened in my own mind, in eight years, was not so much a change or reversal of opinions, as an expansion or development of interests. There are, it is true, faults of style which I regret; and especially I detect frequently a stiffness and an assumption of pontifical solemnity that may be tiresome to many readers.” He concluded: “I do not, on the whole, repudiate it.” CPCE iii: 413.

The question came up also in the letter to William Force Stead in which Eliot first signaled his desire to enter the Church of England (7 January 1927; L3: 359-60). Eliot wrote: “One may change one’s ideas, sentiments and point of view from time to time; one would be rather atrophied if one did not; but change of mind is a very different thing from repudiation. I do not see why one should ‘repudiate’ anything that one has written provided that one continues to believe that the thing written was a sincere expression at the time of writing. One might as well repudiate infancy and childhood.”
capacity to know the truth all on his own. Eliot announcement of his desire for discipline came in a form that affirmed that he didn’t need it at all.

This chapter aims to explicate Eliot’s conversion in a way that honors that ambivalence. It presents two ways of understanding Eliot’s conversion: two hermeneutics of conversion. Both of these hermeneutics are valid; both are illuminating. I have an argument to make about which I find superior, which I will develop only briefly in the coda that follows. I have not made that argument here because I cannot make it on the facts. On the facts, I find the two understandings of Eliot’s conversion equally compelling. That is, I hold that how one understands Eliot’s conversion depends upon a decision that reflects the interpreter’s values or disciplinary habits (in the final analysis, perhaps they are inseparable). I have limited the scope of this chapter to a presentation of the two different hermeneutics in the service of the argument that Eliot was unwilling or unable to decide between them. The chapter aims to clarify the stakes of that equivocation regarding the change his religious conversion demanded of him in his hermeneutics—in his most basic habits of understanding.\(^9\)

Late in his life, Michel Foucault outlined a contrast between two “hermeneutics of the subject” that are useful here: between a “cathartics of truth” and an “ethics of truth.”\(^10\) The juxtaposition between Anglican Eliot and Foucault in the early 1980s is perhaps jarring. Foucault would have recognized in Eliot an exemplary product of the sexually repressive, logocentric

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9 I have learned about Eliot’s demurrals from my colleague Danny Braun, to whom I am grateful for his encouragement and friendship.

disciplinary regime that Christianity has built into the West as we know it. Eliot may well have found the “aesthetics of existence,” to which Foucault turned not only in his intellectual work but also lived out—most famously in limit-experiences of pleasure and pain in San Francisco’s BDSM scene—as an abhorrent extension of the quintessentially “Romanticist” position which sees the expressive self as the ground of aesthetic and moral value. The juxtaposition is intentional, however. For one notes that Foucault’s work on hermeneutics emerged in the midst of his own “conversion:” the turn in his thought away from knowledge and toward care, away from the dispassionate analysis of power’s operation in the constitution of the subject and toward the techniques by which subjects so constituted could develop an ethical relation to themselves and in turn make of their life a work of art. One value of turning to Foucault’s thinking about the hermeneutics of the subject to theorize Eliot’s conversion is precisely to decouple these modes of understanding from their uses (although, in the next section, I will be at pains to honor the doctrinal and liturgical specificity of Eliot’s Anglo-Catholicism). By using Foucault’s “conversion” to theorize Eliot’s, I want to disrupt any sense of necessary connection between modes of understanding and the ethical ends to which they are directed. In so doing, I suggest, the dynamics of Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism might be made legible even to those who have no interest in Eliot’s “religion” as a case-study in an approach to changing one’s mind that sees such change as the end and not the origin of ethical action.

Let us begin with the cathartic hermeneutic. In this mode of understanding, the pursuit of truth or transcendent value requires “some kind of break with the sensory world, the world of error, interest, and pleasure, with the whole world which, in relation to the eternity of truth and

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its purity, constitutes the universe of the impure.”

One paradigm of such spiritual purification or enlightenment is the Neo-Platonist ascent of the mountain of philosophy. Once relieved of the “accidents of emotion” or “impure desires,” the subject comes face to face with a knowledge that he now recognizes as a memory. Truth is not learned, but rediscovered in an antecedent self. For Foucault, another paradigm is the Cartesian meditation: with the cogito, Descartes “placed self-evidence at the origin—self-evidence as it appears, that is to say as it is given, as it is actually given to consciousness without any possible doubt.”

Consciousness of oneself (one’s own consciousness) becomes the unmediated vision that grounds all other knowledge.

Thus, as Foucault stressed, this cathartic model presumes a significant continuity within the subject that belies the apparently radical nature of the break required to recognize the truth. The subject is already entirely prepared to confront and accept the truth. It is only that the obstacles to understanding need to be removed. Change in the subject is a change of mind (a change in “point of view”) effected “solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change—or be changed—in his being as subject.”

This is a compelling frame in which to understand Eliot’s conversion. First, as a political being Eliot prized purity and raged for order, and he persistently fantasized that such order

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13. Hermeneutics of the Subject, 14. By making the self-evidence of the subject’s own existence the premise for all knowledge, Descartes excluded the care of the self from the field of modern philosophical thought. The “researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for the access to the truth”—all these fall outside the realm of “thought” after Descartes. Foucault contested this, arguing that an “act of knowledge” could never give access to the truth “unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject; not of the individual, but of the subject himself in his being as subject” (16). As a matter of historical discourse, however, such practices and techniques have been relegated, after Descartes, to the sphere of what Foucault calls “spirituality.”

existed under the transcendent authority of pre-modern institutions. Such reactionary nostalgia was what had drawn Eliot to the writings of Charles Maurras and galvanized his support for *L’Action Française* almost two decades prior; indeed “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion” matched Maurras’ three-part program for a restored France—*classique, catholique, monarchique* — excepting only Eliot’s adaptation to a national English church.¹⁵ Eliot’s support for Maurras and *L’Action Française* remained solid for three decades; Eliot twice credited Maurras with having led him into the church.¹⁶ Eliot was relieved to have a doctrinal orthodoxy into which he could dissolve his anxious, vagrant mind; he was bolstered by the transcendent authority on whose behalf he could cast judgment upon the corrupted modern world. Eliot was gratified by the fantasy of a return to a homogeneous and “organic” community working and worshiping together: this manifested itself most obviously and repellently in his anti-Semitism. One recalls that Maurras’ *L’Action Française* was born as an anti-Dreyfusard organ and was rife with virulent anti-Semitic rhetoric.¹⁷

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¹⁶ The first was in Eliot’s defense of Maurras against Leo Ward’s charge that Maurras was only nominally and pragmatically a defender of Catholicism, and that his ideas in fact led his readers and followers away from Christianity. “I have been a reader of the work of Maurras for eighteen years,” Eliot replied tartly in a *Criterion* review: “upon me he has had exactly the opposite effect.” *The Monthly Criterion* 7 (March 1928): 203; *CPCE* iii: 374. The second instance is more oblique, but more intriguingly enmeshed in the internal dynamics of conversion that Eliot explored in *Ash-Wednesday*. As Torrens notes, Eliot wrote a meditation on his student years in France for *Aspects de la France et du Monde* (Paris, 25 April 1928), in which he recalls envisioning Maurras among his countrymen as “a sort of Virgil who leads them to the temple gate.” Torrens comments: “In some subtle way, then, Maurras was very much at Eliot’s side as he entered into the theological allegory of the poet whom he admired most in the world, Dante Alighieri. Maurras, among others, came leading Eliot to the Garden, and stood perhaps among those ‘children at the gate / who will not go away and cannot pray’” (316).

¹⁷ Maurras considered anti-Semitism to be a natural current for *L’Action Française* to exploit because it corresponded intuitively with the roots of the reactionary royalist program. See Eugen Weber, *Action
of view” by such a man, Eliot’s infamous statement of 1933 that in an ideal society, “reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable” is quite consistent with a conception of “catholicity” defined historically by the exclusion of Jews and violence against them.\(^\text{18}\) Fleeing the confusion and alienation he had diagnosed in *The Waste Land*, Eliot concocted a medieval idyll of Anglo-Saxon uniformity, a society bound together by the “habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of ‘the same people living in the same place.’”\(^\text{19}\) And he projected the threat to that idyll onto the figure of a cosmopolitan alien, the “free-thinking Jew” whose double was Eliot was himself.\(^\text{20}\) The son of a Unitarian businessman in the American Midwest, Eliot as a young man had overcompensated in cultivating the sophisticated intelligence of a nation-less “European:” both his Puritan origins and his cosmopolitan enculturation made him inassimilable to the nostalgia-project of Anglican England, whose embrace he coveted and whose mantle he wanted to claim.

Secondly, to understand Eliot’s conversion as an escape from the corrupted and confused to a stable, unadulterated position is also persuasive because that cathartic trope dominated Eliot’s profoundly influential critical essays published between 1919 and 1921. Attacking the Romantic ideology of poetry as the expression of a poet’s soul, Eliot’s refrain was that

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\(^{18}\) *CPCE* v: 20.

\(^{19}\) *CPCE* v: 19.

personality was the perennial source of pollution in critical and creative work, that which must be stripped away as impure or accidental. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Eliot famously rendered this position in the objective rhetoric of bench-chemistry. He imagined a poem as a new chemical synthesis of available rhetorical and emotional materials: the mind of the poet, like the shred of platinum, simply catalyzes the reaction of those materials, while itself remaining “inert, neutral, and unchanged.” Likewise, Eliot described the ideal of criticism with the Neo-Platonic trope of purifying spiritual ascesis: “The end of the enjoyment of poetry is a pure contemplation from which all the accidents of personal emotion are removed.” Lastly, Eliot’s radical view of literary history and his correlative reorganization of the canon in “The Metaphysical Poets” invoked the inverse of this purifying trope: a narrative of corruption and decay. “In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.”

Finally, the cathartic frame is persuasive because by converting to Anglo-Catholicism, Eliot simply remembered something he had known for a long time: in his notes for an extension

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22 “The Perfect Critic,” CPCE ii: 269. Given the impact of Eliot’s earlier criticism, it is unsurprising that Eliot’s own critics understood his conversion as a new solution to the old problem of finding an “escape from personality.” Eliot had simply found a new trap-door. Conrad Aiken, for one, mocked it as a retreat to empty absolutes: “From the psychological chaos of the ‘I’ and the ‘now,’” he wrote, “let us seek refuge in a world of canons, forms, and rituals.” “Retreat,” Dial 86 (July 1929): 628-30; in Jewel Spears Booker, T.S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004): 164. He continued: “Cautiously, jejunely, with an air of puritan acerbity, it seeks a refuge from humanity in Grace, from personality in dogma, and from the present in the past. Turning its back on the living word, it retreats into a monastic chill; and denies the miracle and abundance of life” (165). On this reading, Eliot’s announcement in the preface to For Lancelot Andrewes affirmed that he had broken with the heretically false; he now looked down from a mountaintop on the heathen who did not share his “point of view.”

Eliot was sensitive to this reading of his conversion that the preface had helped engender: he glumly wrote to his friend and mentor Paul Elmer More that his announcement had been widely received as “an escape or evasion, certainly a defeat.” 3 August 1929, L4: 567. He felt misunderstood: “I acknowledge the difficulty of a positive Christianity nowadays; and I can only say that the dangers pointed out, and my own weaknesses, have been apparent to me long before my critics noticed them. But it [is] rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey afoot.”

25 CPCE ii: 380.
course he gave in 1916 on Modern French Literature, Eliot implicitly endorsed the contemporary criticism of Rousseauvian romanticism—the belief in the essential goodness of human beings and a corollary theory of art as the expression of individual personality and rich feeling. Eliot defined “classicism,” its rejoinder, as “essentially a belief in Original Sin—the necessity for austere discipline.” And he anticipated the conversion he would make a decade in the future, associating it with a return to the past. “The present day movement is partly a return to the ideals of the seventeenth century. A classicist in art and literature will therefore be likely to adhere to a monarchical form of government, and to the Catholic church.”

Eliot’s conversion, on this account, was not a change at all; it was the public declaration of what he had long believed.

Then again, by that same token, one could argue that it took Eliot ten years to submit himself to the discipline he prescribed to others. This brings us to the second way of understanding Eliot’s conversion. Under the rubric of what Foucault called the “ethics of truth,” persons are conceived as constitutively unprepared to access the truth, unequal to it. In contrast to the cathartic model in which one simply recognizes the truth once a veil of illusion has been lifted, within the ethical model one must be changed in one’s being as a subject in order to achieve the capacity to hold the truth. One does not acknowledge a truth hidden deep within;

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25 Schuchard, having discovered the syllabus of the 1916 extension lectures, argued that it disproved the received historiography of Eliot’s work, in which the skeptical, despairing, and ironic poet and critic turns from a “from an esthetic and literary theory of tradition to a moral and religious doctrine of orthodoxy” (“Eliot and Hulme in 1916,” 1083). “These widespread opinions are misleading, for by 1916 Eliot’s classical, royalist, and religious point of view was already formulated.” Peter Ackroyd likewise took this discovery as evidence for his position that Eliot “did not develop as a ‘thinker’: he merely elaborated on the implications of his previous convictions.” *T.S. Eliot: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984): 75.
rather one internalizes truths through disciplines of appropriation and application—including truths that one might otherwise resist.\textsuperscript{26} Knowledge of the self, of the world, of philosophical or metaphysical realities is all dependent on practices by which one diligently integrates knowledge it into an ethos: a program of habits and dispositions by which that truth is becomes part of one’s second nature.\textsuperscript{27} One is transformed in and through acts that become automatic, that often fall below the level of conscious intention. Truth is not something that one rediscoveres by returning to an antecedent position of purity, but something one strives to achieve, to live out.

This desire for an integration of knowledge into life—and thought into feeling—is also continuous with Eliot’s previous career. It is legible in all the influential essays quoted above. What was of such value in the metaphysical poets, that Eliot would reorganize the canon of English poetry around them? Their poetry was an engine for the integration of rational intellection and sensuous perception. The metaphysical poets walked around in the world with their intelligence in their fingertips, diffusing new words and wisdom from the main vein of the mind into the finest capillaries of the body. Eliot called this “sensibility.”\textsuperscript{28} Donne felt his

\textsuperscript{26} Hermeneutics of the Subject, 500.
\textsuperscript{27} Within the ethics of truth, there can be no philosophy—no true knowledge—without such a complex of practices undertaken to form and transform the subject’s very being and action. Foucault called these practices “spirituality.” Hermeneutics of the Subject, 15ff. Given the contemporary usage of that term to connote metaphysical ideas and practices that are opposed to the supposedly repressive authority of religious institutions (i.e. “spiritual but not religious”), to avoid confusion I will use the term discipline to connote the complex of practices that were of inestimable value to Eliot precisely because they broke down the proud illusion of his own self-sufficiency and built up in his habitual action the humble imitation of virtuous exemplars.
\textsuperscript{28} Sensibility was also a site of tension in Eliot’s criticism between the cathartic and ethical modes of interpretation. As F.W. Bateson noted, Eliot, imported both of the conceptions of sensibility he found confused in his studies of Remy de Gourmont. “Contributions to a Dictionary of Critical Terms: II. Dissociation of Sensibility,” Essays in Criticism I.3 (July 1951): 302-12. Sensibility, on the one hand, often denoted a pure perceptive faculty that registered sensations with an ascetic, objective clarity. In Problème du Style, Gourmont described the artist’s sensibility as a product of his or her perceptions and their particular quality: style forms “as sensations accumulate in the neural cells and make the archives of memory denser, richer, and more complex.” Selected Writings, trans. and ed. Glenn S. Burne (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966) 122-3. On the other hand, Gourmont also referred to sensibility as a refined palette of emotional responses built up over time. Sensibility was to be achieved, not revealed: it
thought, Eliot wrote, “as immediately as the odour of a rose.” Their work was synthetic, integral, “constantly amalgamating disparate experience:” new thought and new sensation were continually being linked into supple networks of association and significance. And this “mechanism” of sensibility was capacious: it “could devour any kind of experience.” This discipline was legible in their poetry and poetry was intrinsic to the discipline itself, bodying forth new subtleties of experience in patterns of sound and sense.

This conception of sensibility as an ethos of continual integration is also evident in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Alongside the cathartic conception of the poetry as an escape from personality and emotion, Eliot also conceived it as the result of the poet’s internalization of the tradition in which the poet finds him- or herself. Tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must attain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

This simultaneous order “is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art,” but what makes it “really new” is its emergence out of the whole literature of Europe. In other words, the development of individual sensibility that “could devour any kind of experience” mirrors the continuously adaptive reformulation of tradition itself as new works are had to be built up through habitual associations of affects and ideas. “Words have no meaning,” Gourmont had also written in Problème du Style, “but through the sentiment which they convey and whose representation they are. Even...a theorem can be moving can be moving, and, resolved, make the heart beat faster. It has become feeling, in the sense that it is no longer perceived except in association with a feeling; it can contain a world of desires, be an object of love. The most inert words can be vivified by the sensibility, can ‘become feelings” (Selected Writings, 116).

30 CPCE ii: 381.
31 CPCE ii: 106.
32 ibid.
integrated into it. It is notable, in passing, that the sense of grief or lack that implicitly surrounds the present in the declension narrative Eliot formulated in “The Metaphysical Poets” (“from which we have never recovered”) is nowhere in evidence here. The literary present has all the resources of the past available to it, if one is willing to put in the great labour of internalizing them, so that one’s work may in turn be integrated into the tradition out of which one writes.  

Eliot’s conversion, in other words, is also legible under the ethical hermeneutic, as the choice of a new tradition by which he wanted to be formed and into which he wanted to be integrated. Again, I am not arguing that this hermeneutic supplants or supersedes the cathartic interpretation. I am arguing that Eliot’s conversion may also be understood as his uneven and incomplete submission to the discipline of the Anglo-Catholic tradition: in that discipline he sought to integrate his intellect and his intuition and to organize his non-rational faculties toward an absolute good. It required him to assume its language as his own, to assume the posture of humility and supplication that its prayers make manifest, and to see the world not as a place of corruption and loss, but as the sphere of divine presence and human hope.

For the moment, I leave aside the ways in which Eliot’s students might understand his conversion and turn to the terms in which Eliot himself rendered it in his 1930 poem *Ash-Wednesday*. Its subject was the struggle to submit—and its costs. In what follows, I read that poem as a drama of the slow and humbling breakdown of Eliot’s will to see himself as superior to discipline, as sufficient to himself. For despite his antipathy to liberal politics and liberal

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33 This neatly parallels Eliot’s early writing about the critical sensibility, which also tenses the discipline of integration against the cathartic ascesis. In “The Perfect Critic,” Eliot described the gift of “superior sensibility” as the product of wide and deep reading, in which the metabolism of new works continually modifies the impressions of the old. “An impression needs to be constantly refreshed by new impressions in order that it may persist at all; it needs to take its place in a system of impressions.” Criticism itself is a rendering of this system in its continual process of dynamic reformation: “The true generalization is not something superposed upon an accumulation of perceptions; the perceptions do not, in a really appreciative mind, accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility” (*CPCE* ii: 269-70).
theology, he proved to be still very much invested in the assurances of liberal subjectivity: independence, self-presence, sovereignty. I argue that *Ash-Wednesday* dramatizes a *hermeneutic* conversion: the breakdown of Eliot’s most basic, everyday habits of understanding himself and the world and their reformulation by the Anglo-Catholic liturgy. The poem provides the terms by which Eliot tried to understand his conversion as an event and as an ongoing process. I then conclude by returning to Eliot’s infamous statement about “free-thinking Jews” as a test of those terms.

*i. Eliot’s First Problem: Devices of the Heart*

We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.

— General Confession said daily during Morning Prayer

*Ash-Wednesday* was an experiment in a poetic new to Eliot, a poetic he appropriated and adapted from his hero Dante. When it was published, Eliot wrote to George Bell, Bishop of Chichester:

“The whole thing aims to be a modern *Vita Nuova*, on the same plane of hallucination, and treating a similar problem of ‘sublimation’ (horrid word). However pathetically it falls below that amazing book, the comparison is useful, in making clear that this is not ‘devotional’ verse. That can only be written by men who have gone far ahead of me in spiritual development; I have only tried to express a certain intermediate phase”

The *Vita Nuova* was Dante’s youthful meditation on the nature of love, an account of his first glimpse of Beatrice, and his ambitious first attempt to synthesize the medieval intellectual and poetic traditions in the Florentine vernacular. Eliot stressed that for him, the *Vita Nuova* offered a

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34 *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the use of the Church of England* (London: Rivingtons, 1888): 60. Hereafter *BCP*.

35 *L*, 258. In a letter to Paul Elmer More, Eliot wrote that *Ash-Wednesday* was “really a first attempt at a sketchy application of the philosophy of the *Vita Nuova* to modern life.” 2 June 1930; *L*, 209. See also 16 May 1930 to Laurence Binyon: “I shall send you my *Ash Wednesday*, which is merely an attempt to do the verse of the *Vita Nuova* in English” (*L*, 183).
blueprint for bringing one’s emotions into line with the truths one held intellectually: not just to know what was right, but through a work of imagination to come to want what was right, to delight in it. He wrote to Paul Elmer More that the poem was “of capital importance for the discipline of the emotions.” It was a discipline Eliot knew he needed, and needed more of. As he wrote to Bell, the poem could not be called devotional verse. For it dramatized not Eliot’s devotion, but the process by which his devotion might be produced.

As he had written in his 1929 essay on Dante, Eliot understood the *Vita Nuova* to be a product of a practice by which Dante continually reinterpreted past experience in light of his developing conception of his spiritual life and its end in God.

I find in it an account of a particular kind of experience: that is, of something which had actual experience (the experience of the ‘confession’ in the modern sense) and intellectual and imaginative experience (the experience of thought and the experience of dream) as its materials; and which became a third kind. [...] If you have that sense of intellectual and spiritual realities that Dante had, then a form of expression like the *Vita Nuova* cannot be classed either as ‘truth’ or ‘fiction.’

This “third kind” of experience, Eliot argued, was largely obscured by modern critical habits that interpreted first person literary works as rooted in personal experience, expressed with differing degrees of sincerity, creativity, and self-understanding. For Eliot, such cathartic hermeneutics—seeking a pure and stable point of origin—led to an inevitable misunderstanding of the *Vita Nuova*; it was neither an account of an “authentic,” immediate experience, nor an expression of Dante’s “worldview,” nor an allegory reducible to a systematic rational theology. Though Eliot did believe that the *Vita Nuova* had a germ in Dante’s personal experience, his

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36 *CPCE* iii: 731.
37 “I mean the minds of those who have read or could have read such a document as Rousseau’s *Confessions*. The modern mind can understand the ‘confession,’ that is, the literal account of oneself, varying only in degree of sincerity and self-understanding, and it can understand ‘allegory’ in the abstract.” *ibid*, 731. Given the modern proclivity to seek the meaning of the text in its origins rather than its ends, Eliot wrote, Dante “has to educate our senses as he goes along. The insistence throughout is upon states of feeling; the reasoning only takes its proper place as a means of reaching these states” (722).
account of that experience was not valorized by its primary intensity or facticity, but by the meaning that it came to have when aligned with the story that Dante saw, much later, as the shape of his life. It was not “meant as a description of what he consciously felt on his meeting with Beatrice, but rather as a description of what that meant on mature reflection upon it.” Dante’s attitude toward that experience could “only be understood by accustoming ourselves to find meaning in final causes rather than in origins.” For Dante, of course, this final cause was attraction towards God: this was the highest love that ordered all other loves.

*Ash-Wednesday* thus demands to be read in light of its ends—ends which were doctrinally and liturgically specific. For Eliot did not become “religious;” he became an Anglo-Catholic. Anglo-Catholicism in the 1910s and 20s was a minority reform movement within the Anglican Church working to re-center English worship and devotion around the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. *Ash-Wednesday* accordingly enacts Eliot’s struggles to understand his own being and action within a narrative defined by God’s being and action in the world. The poem draws heavily on the prayers and postures of the Anglican liturgy, in which participants continually declare their desolation and despair apart from God, and their desire to ground themselves in the theological reality of God’s sovereignty and care: “O God, make speed

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38 *CPCE* iii: 732. Eliot averred that he was uninterested in the historical details of that meeting. “Whether the lady was the Portinari or not, I do not care; it is quite as likely that she is a blind for someone else.”

39 For a comprehensive account of Anglo-Catholic practice at the time of Eliot’s conversion and Anglo-Catholic reform efforts within the Church of England in the 1910s and 20s, see Barry Spurr, *Anglo-Catholic in Religion*: *T.S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010). For contemporary accounts of Anglo-Catholicism by its practitioners, see A.E. Manning Foster, *Anglo-Catholicism* (London: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1913) and Sheila Kaye-Smith, *Anglo-Catholicism* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1925). Anglo-Catholics also recuperated devotional practices honoring the Virgin Mary, the human mother of the Incarnate God, including the praying of the rosary. Most notably, Anglo-Catholics emphasized the spiritual formation of believers in and through the Eucharist: mainline Anglican churches celebrated the Eucharist once a month; in Anglo-Catholic churches, it was celebrated daily. Eliot attended a morning Eucharist every day from 1926 onwards.
to save us; O Lord, make haste to help us." The poem dramatizes a slow and serpentine process of ethical discipline into a new sensibility of dependence and humble receptivity to the forms by which the highest good is made manifest “even among these rocks.” That is its end.

But this is not where the poem begins. It begins with—and returns, again and again, to—the speaker’s resistance: a resistance that registers in the speaker’s habitual hermeneutics on the cathartic model. These habits set the speaker apart from the world as self-sufficient, sovereign, and very much alone. The poem dramatized Eliot’s temptation to understanding his conversion as a new ground for this familiar situation: as a withdrawal from the world into a stoic detachment—a detachment that allowed him to remain in firm control of his own story. It begins:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the agèd eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?

We are up on the mountaintop. An eagle builds its aerie at a great height, often on the outcropping of a narrow cliff. This speaker looks down upon the world from his permanent nest, insisting that he has achieved peace. Eliot’s speaker has already turned, and that turning is proved by his divestment of attachments to “this man’s gift and that man’s scope.” There is nothing left worth aspiring to in the world below. He has made a clean, cathartic break from the illusory satisfactions of the “usual reign.” He decides the end to which his actions are oriented;

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40 “Order for Evening Prayer,” BCP, 70.
41 As the poem’s earliest commentators noted, the poem is organized around the trope of the purifying spiritual ascent. The third section in particular invokes The Dark Night of the Soul and The Ascent to Mount Carmel, works of the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross: confronting distraction and debility of will, the speaker climbs a winding stair, to be graced with “strength beyond hope and despair.” See in particular Leonard Unger, “Notes on Ash-Wednesday,” The Southern Review 4 (1 January 1938): 745-70. It is important to note, however, that the climb is preceded by a descent to the burning plain.
he alone decides the narrative frame within which his actions have meaning.

This opening is intentionally unsettling. In this trebled insistence on turns completed, the reader gradually recognizes a man making an argument, a man convincing himself that he already is where he had hoped to arrive.\(^\text{42}\) One would expect a tricolon of praise from an Anglo-Catholic at home in the Lord: “O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name.”\(^\text{43}\) Yet this speaker seems to have turned inward, to have narrowed his concern to the boundaries of a sovereign I: away from others, away from the earth, away from praise. He offers a tricolon of rejected hope. As the poem moves forward, these opening lines become legible as a *post facto* defense against disappointment: the speaker had wanted something more, some expected transformation that has not occurred.

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Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again
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Perhaps Eliot’s speaker had hoped for enlightenment upon arrival, “to know” the source of truth and power face to face. Or perhaps he had hoped “to know again” the intensity of prior spiritual experience: one thinks of Eliot falling to his knees in St. Peter’s in May 1926.\(^\text{44}\) Such an

\(^{42}\) Hugh Kenner describes the arc of *Ash-Wednesday* as a movement from “ratiocinative submission” to “a tension among substantial presences (‘And the weak spirit quickens to rebel / For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell’) that has no use for ‘because’ and ‘consequently.’” *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959): 263. The point on which one might quibble is: how submissive is this speaker in these opening lines? Or better, what is the narrative within which such submission has meaning and value?

\(^{43}\) Psalm 96; 1-2a, *New Revised Standard Version*.

\(^{44}\) Though secondhand, the account of Eliot’s friend and fellow parishioner George Every puts Eliot’s 1926 experience in Rome in its appropriate context: “his sister-in-law remembered being with him and his first wife, Vivien, when they all together entered St. Peter’s, Rome. Vivien, who wasn’t easily impressed, said something like, ‘It’s very fine’, and then they suddenly saw that Tom was on his knees praying. … It
experience would be appropriate to the mountaintop setting: Moses and Elijah experienced God intimately on Sinai; Peter and James, and John witnessed the Transfiguration of Christ upon Mt. Tabor. Yet such an experience has not occurred: the speaker is not purified, has not escaped himself; he has not been “born again” through a crisis resolved by revelation.

The poem opens up on the mountaintop, yet this setting is neither Sinai, nor the mount of Transfiguration. “There, where trees flower, and springs flow”—where the speaker cannot drink—this is an oblique allusion to Dante’s description of the earthly paradise at the top of the mountain of Purgatory, a setting that will find further support later in the poem. The earthly paradise is a site of affecting transition and spiritual transformation in the *Commedia*: it is along the bank of the Lethe—one of the two rivers that spring there—that the pilgrim Dante meets Beatrice, the love of his youth who has graciously intervened when Dante was lost in the dark wood of *Inferno* I, sending Virgil to guide him along his journey. If, as John Freccero has written, the *Commedia* is “a journey of interpretation, an itinerary of the mind seeking understanding,” it is here that the pilgrim must commit to an interpretive frame organized toward a specifically Christian truth and Christian *caritas*. And in so doing, he must let go of other

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was the first hint that his brother and sister-in-law had that his conversion was imminent, and they naturally misunderstood it. They thought he was going to Rome, and perhaps he thought so himself. ...at this point his Christianity was becoming more than an interest, [rather] an experience which had to be practised.” “Eliot as a Friend and a Man of Prayer,” unpublished paper, quoted in Spurr, 43. Every rightly insists that this experience—call it mystical, call it what one will—was neither sufficient unto itself, nor sufficient for meaningful transformation of life. Christianity for Every, as for Eliot, was an experience that had to be *practiced*.

45 Dante speaks to Matelda from across the Lethe in *Purgatorio* xxviii: in her telling, the water is not part of the natural water cycle, “ma esce di Fontana salda e certa / che tanto dal voler di Dio riprende / quant’ella versa da due parti aperta” [it issues from a never-failing fountain that, opening in two directions, gives back to the will of God as much as it pours forth] (124-6). The one spring is the Lethe, which takes away memory of sin; the other is the Eunoê, which restores the memory of every good deed. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 2, Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. Robert Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

narratives: it is here that Dante realizes that to fare forward on his journey requires leaving Virgil behind.47

Eliot thus places his speaker at a site that alludes to a vivid encounter and a corresponding spiritual renewal—and yet such renewal appears inaccessible or forbidden to him. Within the allusive texture of “Perch’io non spero,” what seems to be at issue is the speaker’s inability to confront his own proud insistence on maintaining control of his own narrative. In the Purgatorio, the pilgrim Dante does drink of the Lethe, and in so doing completes his purgation and ascends into the experience of paradise—but first he must suffer the rebuke of Beatrice.

Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice.
Come degnasti d’accedere al monte?
Non sapei tu che qui è l’uom felice?48

At issue is Dante’s pride: Come degnasti – how have you deigned to approach this mountain?

Don’t you not know that here mankind is happy? At this moment of new beginning, her cutting

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47 Seeing the veiled figure of Beatrice approach from across the river, the pilgrim is returned to himself as a vulnerable nine-year-old overthrown by love on his first sight of her. The pilgrim turns to Virgil “like a child to his mother,” and as a pupil still trying to please his master. He interprets the physical shock of Beatrice’s presence by alluding to the fourth book of the Aeneid, in which Dido tells her sister Anna that she feels her heart enlivened with love for the first time since her husband’s death—love for Aeneas: agnosco veteris vestigia flammae (Aeneid 4.23). Dante’s Italian reads “conosco i segni de l’antica fiamma” [I recognize the signs of the ancient flame]. “Lacking speech of his own, therefore, he falls back on the parent text, the Aeneid.” Peter Hawkins, “Dido, Beatrice, and the Signs of Ancient Love,” in Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination (Stanford: Stanford UP: 1999): 125-44.

There is an ironic pathos to this quotation: the pilgrim Dante understands the stirring of his love for Beatrice through a narrative of passion to which the poet Dante has already alluded in Inferno V; placing Dido in the infernal circle of the lustful, the poet had implicitly blamed her disordered love for Aeneas for the destruction of Carthage and her own suicide. In other words, Dante is confronted with the woman who will align his carnal love for her with the love of God; yet in his attempt to understand his visceral response to her presence, he draws on an interpretive frame in which passion and virtue are opposed. The poor fit of this allusion to the circumstance is made poignantly clear when the pilgrim discovers that Virgil has returned to Limbo without a farewell; he has no authority here. Virgil’s authority as guide has grown increasingly tenuous through the Purgatorio as he and the pilgrim have climbed away from the hell and toward a spiritual reality he does not understand; now that authority has passed to Beatrice, who will bring the pilgrim into the earthly paradise and lead him through the celestial spheres.

48 Purg. XXX: 73-5. Beatrice is described as having the bearing of an admiral inspecting ship and crew, encouraging their efforts and upbraiding them when their work is slack. (XXX: 58-60) The image chimes with the description of the pilgrim at the start of the Inferno as a victim of a shipwreck.
remark recalls the pilgrim to his initial situation at the start of the *Inferno*: lost in the dark wood, the pilgrim came to the foot of a mountain and saw the sun—source of wisdom and knowledge—rising behind it. In his hubris, the pilgrim had tried to ascend to that knowledge without any training of his will. Knowledge was as an object to be attained, not the fruit of virtuous action organized toward God.\(^{49}\) The pilgrim is cut to the quick: his pursuit of truth apart from submission to God insured not only his failure, but his unhappiness, and he preferred this unhappiness to the discipline and penance required to live in the only truth that can give lasting peace. Dante had “turned his steps along a way not true, following false images of the good, which keep no promise fully.”\(^{50}\) As Beatrice continues to upbraid the pilgrim, he is completely undone. Stunned into speechless shame and then consumed by weeping, he finally faints.\(^{51}\)

Eliot’s poem dramatizes the situation of a man attempting a religious conversion while using all his ingenuity to avoid such a confession. Eliot’s speaker announces himself as one who would renounce all hope for transformation rather than risk a vulnerable confrontation with

\(^{49}\) *Inferno* I: 28-30: The pilgrim climbs “*sì che ‘l piè fermo sempre era ‘l più basso*” [So that my halted foot was always the lower]. As John Freccero notes, Dante was drawing on Aristotelian thinking about the corporal location of the faculties of intellect and will: the pilgrim leads always with his right foot, symbolizing the intellect, while the left foot of the will (on the left because the heart is on the left) drags behind, lamed by the sin of Adam. “Dante’s Firm Foot and the Journey Without a Guide,” *Harvard Theological Review* 52 (1959): 245-81. The pilgrim is able to clearly perceive the goal, but moves toward it with a halting, crippled step.


\(^{51}\) A few theologically important details: the pilgrim endures Beatrice’s description of his sin while standing like a young boy with his eyes on the ground; she demands more of him—that he “*alza la barba, / e prendrai più doglia riguardando*” [lift up his beard, feeling more pain in seeing] her who speaks. Yet when Dante haltingly raises his eyes, his own gaze is redirected by hers: she is not looking at him, but at the gryphon at the center of the allegorical cortège—the gryphon that as a creature having two natures in one, is a type for Christ. Beatrice becomes more even more lovely to Dante in her adoration of Christ and directs his own vision toward the only love to be enjoyed as an end in itself.

The other point to note is that after fainting, the pilgrim awakes as Matelda drags him into the Lethe, whereupon she holds him under until he is forced to swallow some of the water; her delicate loveliness is contrasted with the force of the gesture. It is to be stressed that Dante does not thus purify his own memory—it is a grace that is forced upon him.
another who has the power to reinterpret him. His speaker refuses such submission to another’s voice, another’s face—in effect, preemptively rejecting the intrusion of grace.

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are and
I renounce the blessèd face
And renounce the voice
Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice

In its setting, Eliot aligned his poem with the spiritual possibility of the late cantos in Dante’s Purgatorio. Its voice, however, alludes to a speaker who rejected the sacramental cosmos upon which the Commedia was built, in which the timeless being of God has been made known in time through the Incarnation of Christ, in which the human experience of linear time is porous to God’s timeless grace. Eliot’s poem begins not in the voice of Dante, but in that of Dante’s “first friend” and rival, Guido Cavalcanti. The poem’s first lines allude to Cavalcanti’s “Ballata XI,” which begins “Perch’io non spero di tornar gia mai, / Ballatetta, in Toscana…” Eliot in fact published this first of Ash-Wednesday’s six sections independently in the spring of 1928, in the small French magazine Commerce, under the title “Perch’io non spero.”

The second half of Eliot’s “Perch’io non spero” thus presents an interpretive quandary for the reader: the speaker begins what appears to be a turn from proud self-containment toward a

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52 Eliot imbricated the dynamics of his own spiritual struggle into the generic tension of the dolce stil novo, the “sweet new style” of courtly love poetry in 13th century Italy. In this tradition, the poet addresses a lady whose unattainability is signified by her veil; his incandescent desire is that she would reveal her eyes to him, for in the directness of her gaze is all knowledge, all goodness, all beatitude. “Ballata XI” in particular made great sport of the lady’s unattainability: Cavalcanti’s poem dramatized the pain of its speaker’s insuperable distance from the object of his address, but also covertly exulted in the creative freedom allowed in a missive that would never reach its audience. The question begged by this courtly frame is whether Eliot’s prayer is merely the occasion for a poem that proves his own masterful self-enclosure, or if the prayer a device to root out the habits of stoic self-posturing with which Eliot’s speaker begins.
more vulnerable confessional posture: “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death /
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.” However by aligning his prayer to Mary with
Cavalcanti’s address to his Lady of all grace, Eliot appears to encapsulate that prayer within a
poetic construction of his own making: it remains ensconced within the speaker’s controlled and
convenient fiction, a constructed pretense for religious emotion much as Cavalcanti’s ballatetta
was a pretense for an experience of love. The poem’s swerve into petitionary prayer comes
immediately after the speaker announces that, because he cannot turn again, “Consequently I
rejoice, having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice:”

And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And I pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgement not be too heavy upon us

The reader has no assurance that the speaker’s apparently vulnerable prayers are not internal to a
convenient fiction, like Cavalcanti’s expressions of devotion to his lady. On the other hand, the
liturgical language to which the speaker turns appears to help him order his mind and desires
toward the conversion that he in fact desires. As an expression of faith in something beyond his
own powers of creation, the speaker’s sincerity is in question. The speaker appears to be using
his address to an audience as an occasion to dramatize a version of himself, not to be seen from
another vantage.⁵³ Note that he asks for his poem to be accepted as penance for sins he has not

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⁵³ “Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve,” Eliot remarked to the Shakespeare
Association in March 1927—in the vulnerable period after Eliot’s decision to enter the Church of
England but before his baptism and confirmation. “Nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of
oneself.” The lecture of 18 March 1927 was subsequently published as a pamphlet for the Shakespeare
Association that fall. Eliot collected the lecture in Selected Essays under the title “Shakespeare and the
Stoicism of Seneca.” CPCE iii: 245-60; 248. His case in point was Othello, whose final speech Eliot
regarded as Othello’s attempt to “escape reality” by turning away from the wreckage wrought by his
confessed: “Let these words answer / For what is done, not to be done again.” He asks to be sentenced, as it were, to time already served.

The remaining lines of the poem offer no conclusive evidence that the speaker passes out of this state of ironic self-dramatization and into sincere prayer.

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the our of our death

Yet these final stanzas subtly imply that sincerity is not a precondition for spiritual transformation. Perhaps sincerity is a red herring. These lines are not without poignancy: they give one pause to consider if the poem to this point has in fact been a habitual spinning out of “matters that with myself I too much discuss / Too much explain.” Up to this point in the poem, the clauses beginning “Because” at the opening of each stanza have read as reasons impassively considered and adopted in a controlled logical sequence. These lines drive a wedge into that logic: however intellectualized or oblique they may be, they offer a glimpse of the speaker’s terrible isolation and his debility of will. Only the impotent wings remain, only the habitual flapping of an old bird who cannot escape the vaulted perch built by his pride. The speaker has been brought to a point where his habits of rational defense have broken down, and the root problem—the weakness of his will—has come into view.

jealousy, thinking narrowly of that which he can now control—his own self-image. Before an audience of officers come to make his arrest, he performs a confrontation with himself, bare and unlovely as he is: “When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice.” (V.ii.340-2) In this moment of final reckoning, Eliot argued, Othello recoups his self-mastery by “turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment.” This insistence on interpretive control Eliot called “the attitude of ‘I am myself alone’” (249).
If the speaker cannot move from this place of spiritual stasis because of a broken will ("these wings are no longer wings to fly / But merely vans to beat the air"), then his sincerity is either impossible or immaterial. He is either unable to unify his desires, or unable to sustain his volition under the pressure of vicious habits. Conversion is not something that the speaker can confidently achieve. Perhaps, then, the spiritual value of these lines is that they lead to an admission of fragility and woundedness that the speaker had earlier suppressed: regardless of his sincerity, the second half of the poem represents a change in practice that the speaker’s earlier declaration of his own self-sufficiency was unable to effect. The confident I has vanished, replaced by a collective us; its proud assertions have been replaced by affirmations of his foundational connection to others and to God.54

Notably, it is precisely for a change in practice that the speaker prays: Teach us to sit still. Eliot’s attraction to Anglo-Catholicism was partly predicated on the emphasis it put on the formative power of liturgy and spiritual disciplines.55 He went to church because he wanted to be changed by it—for his will and emotions to be re-ordered toward that which he understood to be

54 For another reading of the problem of the “I” this section, see John Kwan Terry, “Ash-Wednesday: A Poetry of Verification,” The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot, ed. A. David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 132-41; 140. Kwan-Terry, following Balachandra Rajan, describes the I as the site of the problem of conversion, which is understood as an epistemological problem: how can image or expression ever be equal to the fleeting quality of spiritual experience? “The settlement when reached cannot endure,” Rajan writes. “Time in its corrosive nature demands the renewal of any conclusion that is achieved in time … there can be no harbour and no garden except to equip the mind for a new exile” (The Overwhelming Question: A Study of the Poetry of T.S. Eliot (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1976) 56; quoted in Kwan-Terry, 136). There are two issues here: first, Rajan and Kwan-Terry reinscribe the premise of Schleiermachian critique—the inadequacy of expressive form to the subject’s experience of him or herself as totally transparent and absolutely authoritative. This, I argue, is the precisely conceptual frame to which Eliot is seeking an alternative in an ethical hermeneutic, in which “spiritual experience” is only legible as such through reference to a tradition that tells us what has been described by others as such. Secondly, Kwan-Terry’s account of the Eliotic problem of subjectivity makes no mention of the theological frame that for Eliot was its solution. Eliot’s conversion may have made him an exile in a number of ways, but not a spiritual exile in linear time. Time, in the Incarnational frame presaged in Ash-Wednesday and made explicit in Four Quartets, is “redeemed” by the entrance of God into history in the form of Christ, and it is this irruption of the transcendent into the immanent material world that authorizes the tradition through which Eliot understood himself.

55 See Spurr.
the highest good. At the communion service Eliot attended every morning, he would have prayed with the others assembled: “Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that the words, which we have heard this day with our outward ears, may through thy grace be so grafted inwardly in our hearts, that they may bring forth in us the fruit of good living, to the honour and praise of thy Name.”56 With the second petition (“Pray for us sinners”), Eliot enacts the very discipline that will reorganize his will: as though thumbing his rosary, he submits his identity and action to the interpellation of liturgical forms. In other words, Eliot’s speaker submits not only to Mary for help, but surrenders to the prescribed order of Anglican worship and devotion. With this fragment of the Ave Maria, the speaker invokes another will and a greater power beyond the I: he prays that God’s will might be “grafted inwardly” into his own. The discipline of language answers to the devices of a recalcitrant heart.

I have dwelled at length upon “Perch’io non spero”—which would become the first section of Ash-Wednesday—in order to highlight the hermeneutic tension with which the poem is concerned. The language of the poem initially announces itself as the expression of the speaker’s sovereign will: he has stripped himself of worldly concerns and achieved a purity of purpose. Yet the allusive framing of these lines ironizes the speaker’s attempt to effect this conversion while his sincerity remains centered and his agency unquestioned. The poem is a farce of conversion as catharsis. And it would be only a farce were it not for the possibility that its language might be understood not as an expression of a purified will, but as an aspect of a formative discipline which organizes a fallible and divided will toward particular visions of the good—toward autonomy and control, or toward a humble dependence upon the providence of God and rest in His will. In the next section, I offer more succinct readings of three moments in the succeeding sections of Ash-Wednesday in which Eliot’s meditates on the challenge of understanding and

56 “The Order of the Administration of the Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion,” BCP, 176.
using language as a formative discipline: training a self capable of emotional and spiritual experiences aligned with Christian humility and caritas, not as the expression of a pre-existing, sovereign self. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of pride to surrender: the will to see oneself as the authoritative interpreter of one’s interior life. As the next section of Ash-Wednesday makes clear, for Eliot it was a will that died hard.

**ii. Eliot’s Second Problem: How to get a new heart**

“Some damned fool of a Cambridge paper referred to it as devotional poetry, which rather misses the point.”
— Eliot to William Force Stead, on Ash-Wednesday

As in the first section of Ash-Wednesday, Eliot places his speaker in a scene of transformational encounter in order to dramatize his resistance to transformation. This second section offers another ironic fantasy of conversion on the cathartic model. Having been frustrated in his attempt at a stoic escape from the world in the first section, the speaker promptly tries another tack. Perversely, he incorporates the insights with which the first section concluded: the speaker had prayed for discipline (“Teach us to sit still”) and given voice to formative language of a tradition—language that might discipline him into a posture of penitence and vulnerability to God’s grace. In this second section, the speaker takes those spiritual insights to an extreme that perverts their intention. Here, consumed by the leopards and bleached by the desert sun, the speaker has apparently achieved a perfect stillness in death, an absolute zero of being. Rather than submit to discipline, the speaker has sought obliteration. The speaker turns from a prayer of humble devotion to the Virgin to an address to a “lady” who is no vehicle for grace, but rather a poetic device occasioning a monologic romance of self-sacrifice.

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The second section of *Ash-Wednesday* makes explicit the drama of courtly address that the first section kept implicit and allusive:58

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull. And God said
Shall these bones live? shall these
Bones live?

Yet there is also a clear allusion to a shift in scene. The backdrop to this address is no longer the purgatorial mountaintop of confession and absolution, “where trees flower, and springs flow,” but now a desert valley that alludes to the valley of dry bones in the prophetic vision of Ezekiel. This prophetic account of Israel’s restoration to the promised land after exile in Babylon is one of the most celebrated passages in the Hebrew Bible. God places Ezekiel in a valley full of dry bones; God says to him: “Son of man, can these bones live?”

And I answered, ‘O Lord God, thou knowest.’ Again he said unto me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say unto them: O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus sayeth the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live.’59

Ezekiel repeats the words, and is shocked to see the prophecy enacted before his eyes: the bones rattle and shake, coming together, each “bone to its bone.” Sinew and flesh cover the bones, and skin, but they are not yet alive: they lack spirit (Heb: *ruach*). They need the “breath” or “wind” of God to be inspired to life. So God commands him to prophesy to the wind, which rushes into these bodies “and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.”

It is a vivid and affecting vision of God’s merciful action to restore a right relationship with an undeserving and rebellious people: Ezekiel’s prophetic vision insists that the restoration

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58 This second section was also published independently, under the title “Salutation,” in New York’s *Saturday Review of Literature* (10 December 1927) and again in *The Criterion*, in January 1928. That is, this poem was published a few months before “Perch’io non spero.”

59 Ezekiel 37: 3-5.
of Israel is the result of God’s speech and action, and precedes even Israel’s repentance. God has not forgotten or abandoned his promises to Abraham, to Moses, or to David; God acts to cleanse his people of their obstinate iniquity. “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them.”

Yet Eliot’s speaker does not want a new heart of flesh; his overblown chivalric oratory crowds out the voice that could offer re-birth, denies that any breath other than his own would ever blow through this desert. For when God asks shall these bones live? we do not hear the humble reply of the prophet Ezekiel: “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.” Instead,

that which had been contained
In the bones (which were already dry) said chirping:
Because of the goodness of this Lady
And because of her loveliness, and because
She honours the Virgin in meditation,

60 “Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And yet shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord.” Ezekiel 37:12-14, Authorized Version.

61 Ezekiel 36: 26-7. Scholars have placed Ezekiel and his later editors as Zadokite priests of the Jerusalem temple: the Zadokites were the developers of the theology of Holiness (preserved, for example, in Leviticus 17-26), in which God promised to bless and protect Israel so long as its people obeyed the law and maintained a ritual purity. This theology dominated the Israelite high priesthood at the time of Jerusalem’s fall to Nebuchadnezzar II, the destruction of Temple in 586 BCE, and the casting of the Judean elites into exile in Babylon. The prophetic imagination of Ezekiel is a frame for processing these traumas, suggesting that Israel’s failure to remain pure led to punishment and exile, but that such punishment did not annul God’s eternal promise of blessing and protection to Israel. In response to the destruction of the physical Temple, Ezekiel offers an eschatological vision of Zion rebuilt and God’s people restored to spiritual wholeness by God’s merciful intervention: God gives his people new and obedient hearts (36: 23-8)—not what they deserve, but what they need to radiate God’s holiness. In the context of this chapter’s concerns, what matters is that Ezekiel balances the Zadokite imperative for purity with an emphasis on God’s primary action: the Israelites do not act first to earn the protection of their God, but rather are called to shape their individual and collective life in response to God’s promise and God’s holiness. They respond to the voice who says, “You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine” (Leviticus: 20:26).
We shine with brightness. And I who am here dissembled
Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love
To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.
It is this which recovers
My guts the strings of my eyes and the indigestible portions
Which the leopards reject. The Lady is withdrawn
In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.
Let the whiteness of bones atone to forgetfulness.
There is no life in them. As I am forgotten
And would be forgotten, so I would forget
Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose.

Contemplation, we are to understand, is conceived by the speaker as a form of self-forgetting, an incandescent devotion that incinerates self-consciousness. Thus this speaker is quite happy that his heart, his liver, and his brain have been consumed by leopards: he understands this as an aspect of his purification that honors his lady, who in turn honors the Virgin in her meditation. His dry bones shine with whiteness that reflects her white-gowned purity. It is vivid evocation of the end-game of the cathartic mode. The speaker stands opposed to the rebirth promised by Ezekiel: he does not want his dry bones to be brought together, clothed in sinew and skin, inspired with the breath of life. “We are glad to be scattered,” he declares at the close of the section, “we did little good to each other.”

Yet the voice persists—even in the recounting of the speaker’s annihilation. The voice chatters on unfazed—the bones “chirp”—though the leopards have eaten his brain and licked his skull clean. He would be destroyed in every part except, paradoxically, in the faculty of the will which would go on desiring the sacrifice; in offering that sacrifice himself, the speaker manages to “recover” his own remainder—“my guts the strings of my eyes…” He would be forgotten in an offering to the lady withdrawn in contemplation; he would forget himself in devotion to her, but his desire never escapes the desire for experience of such self-emptying attention: “so I
would I forget / Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose.” He’ll have what she’s having: he does not recognize that true devotion may require the centering of his attention beyond himself.

This ironized prostration before the lady and the presumptive appropriation of the prophetic mode is answered with God’s mockery: “Prophesy to the wind, to the wind only for only / The wind will listen.” Ezekiel had prophesied to the wind according to God’s command, carefully repeating the words God had given to him, and that wind had brought life back into the resurrected bodies of Israel; here, by contrast, the speaker’s words are his own, and are blown into the void. For his speech is not an attempt at communication: it is a surreptitious project of recovering and reconstituting the “indigestible portions” of a self who can retroactively will everything that has happened to happen.62 So the poem mocks its speaker, whose chatter obstructs his opportunity to be rattled by the very breath of God, reconstituted in a world animated by divine presence and action. “You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.”

The third and fourth sections of the poem are transitional, preparatory: they dramatize the slow and uneven discipline of the speaker’s attention beyond himself. In the third, Eliot draws on the imagery and conceptual vocabulary of St. John of the Cross to suggest that the speaker has taken up the purgative path of spiritual ascent in earnest. The speaker climbs a stair, seeing below him an image of himself (“the same shape”) trapped below, tormented by the devil of these stairs, “who wears / The deceitful face of hope and despair.” The speaker moves beyond his former sense of the spiritual life as defined by the extremes of emotional experience: “At the second turning of the second stair / I left them twisting, turning below.” Ascending, he enters

62 Unger notes that this consumption of the flesh invokes a Eucharistic imagery (757). The problem with this analysis, theologically, is that the speaker is offering his own body to be consumed as a parody of the spiritual food he continues to refuse. On that reading, the speaker would be sacramentalizing his own self-sacrifice, elevating his narcissistic pose to be on par with the atoning death of Christ.
into a darkness that frightens (like a shark’s open jaws) and appalls (“like an old man’s mouth drveling, beyond repair”). This vision of the speaker’s spiritual discipline is marked too by further fantasy: the speaker pauses by a window shaped suggestively (“bellied like the fig’s fruit”) and beholds a scene of pastoral festival in which a woman dances to the music of a flute: “Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown.” Sexuality is figured as a distraction. Yet this distraction is named as such, and the speaker is returned to the practices that further form him in his pursuit of encounter on God’s terms, not his own:

“Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the third stair, Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair Climbing the third stair.”

Lord, I am not worthy
Lord, I am not worthy

but speak the word only.

These final fragments come from a prayer offered by priests before approaching the Eucharistic table. One declares that one has not earned admission to this sacrament, but accepts it as God’s act of free and eternal self-giving. “Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof, but speak the word only, and my soul shall be healed.” This laconic adaptation reflects the speaker’s spiritual ambivalence: on the one hand, the speaker’s earlier refusals of God’s redemptive intervention—in stoic pride and in a perversely proud self-abnegation—have broken down: speak Thou the word. There is an awareness of a strength beyond him, drawing him further up the third stair; this strength endures beneath the speaker’s inevitable distraction, beneath his experience of its absence. On the other, the speaker does not complete his petition for

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63 Unger cites *The Dark Night of the Soul*: “For to some the angel of Satan presents himself—namely, the spirit of fornication—that he may buffet their sense with abominable and violent temptations, and may trouble their spirits with vile considerations and representations which are most visible to the imagination, which things at times are a greater affliction to them than death” (760).

64 The passage alludes to Matthew 8:8, in which Jesus heals the slave of the Roman centurion.
healing: he asks only for “the word”—speech that might fill up a silence he still finds
unbearable.65

The fourth section suggests a return to the scene with which *Ash-Wednesday* began, in
the Dantine imagination of the earthly paradise. We return to the frame of courtly love, and yet
have not returned to the proud isolation of the first section, nor to the long lines of chatter in the
second that exclude every other voice. The speaker does not seclude himself in a fantasy of
autonomy, or manically recounts a story of which he is the hero; his eyes are opened, rather,
“through a bright cloud of tears” to a vision of his own life as part of a larger history redeemed
by God’s action. “Redeem / the time. Redeem / The unread vision in the higher dream.” The
higher dream was what Eliot elsewhere called the allegorical pageant of Christian history that the
pilgrim Dante witnesses in the earthly paradise, whose center is the gryphon representing Christ
as both fully God and fully incarnate man.66 In contrast to earlier sections in which the speaker
dramatized himself against the backdrop of a scene, “cheering himself up” in his dead-end
isolation, this fourth section suggests a new willingness to be immersed in a scene animated by
its own redemptive energy. To the women gathered in the company of a figure suggesting
Beatrice (“One…wearing / White light folded, sheathed about her, folded”), Eliot’s speaker
prays the prayer of Arnaut Daniel, the prayer of one submitting joyfully to the refining fire of his
spiritual discipline: *Sovegna vos*—be mindful of us.

65 G. Douglas Atkins, *T.S. Eliot, Lancelot Andrewes, and the Word: Intersections of Literature and

66 The pageant in the earthly paradise “belongs to the world of what I call the *high dream*, and the
modern world seems capable only of the *low dream*. I arrived at accepting it, myself, only with some
difficulty. There were at least two prejudices, one against Pre-Raphaelite imagery, which was natural to
one of my generation, and perhaps affects generations younger than mine. The other prejudice—which
affects this end of the *Purgatory* and the whole of the *Paradise*—is the prejudice that poetry not only
must be found *through* suffering but can find its material only *in* suffering.” (“Dante,” *CPC* iii: 722)
This section, too, concludes equivocally. On the one hand, the prayer that has issued from the speaker now also burbles up and rains down from the scene itself: the speaker’s desire is echoed by his environment. On the other hand, this unity of purpose makes a discomfiting claim upon the speaker:

    But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down
    Redeem the time, redeem the dream
    The token of the word unheard, unspoken

    Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew
    And after this our exile

Is this a scene of poetic vocation? Is it Eliot himself who must go forth and “redeem the time”—contextualizing empty, linear time in the complete narrative arc of God’s creation, redemption, and final judgment? Must this speaker now try restore to currency a theological imagination (a “higher dream”) that in a broken modern world is the word “unheard, unspoken?” And must he make this effort in the knowledge of his inevitable failure? For the word will remain unheard and unspoken until a future moment of eschatological renewal: “Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew”—the yew, the tree traditionally planted in English graveyards. In sharp contrast to the alienation registered in *The Waste Land*, Eliot’s speaker here experiences the alignment of his will with his surroundings; yet this moment of unison is tinged with an awareness that such a song will be dissonant in the world to which he must return. Being at home in time redeemed means exile from the world that rejects such redemption.

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67 “Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade, / Where heaves the turf in many a mould’ring heap, / Each in his narrow cell for ever laid, / The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.” Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” Eliot was initially chary of the traditional symbolism, telling John Hayward not to read too much into it: “It happened to occur in two or three dreams—one was a dream of the ‘boarhound between the yewtrees’; and that’s all I know about it” (27 April 1930; *L5*: 163). By 1949, Eliot had become more comfortable with it, writing to William Matchett, of *The Dry Salvages*: “With regard to ‘Yew’ it may be both a death symbol, and because it is a very long lived tree, a symbol of the everlasting.” (14 June 1949, quoted in *The Poems of T.S. Eliot Volume 1: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, eds Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2015): 987.
The two final sections of *Ash-Wednesday* work through the speaker’s resistance to such a vocation and the exile it apparently impedes. The fifth section opens with a return to the nattering voice of the second section, the voice that anxiously fills the looming silence which the voice of God might enter and redeem. This speaker is still in need of discipline to “sit still.” Yet here Eliot’s speaker does not work over the materials of the courtly love tradition, but the first verse of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word.”

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.

O my people, what have I done unto thee.

The speaking voice here is still in thrall to its own combinatory power and its own homophonic entertainments. Yet the distraction is not complete: confounded by these foolish phrases, the speaker is prepared for the irruption of the transformative logic of the Incarnation. For these lines are the most powerful argument yet against the premise of the cathartics of truth: if the divine Word, the second person of the Trinity, is “still…within / The world and for the world,”

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68 Mark Jones has suggested that Eliot works over this verse from John’s Gospel much in the same way he admired Lancelot Andrewes for “squeezing and squeezing” a word “until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.” *FLA*, 24-5. Mark Jones selects an excellent example of Andrewes at work, in his 1614 Nativity sermon: “For if this child be ‘Immanuel, God with us,’ then without this Child, this Immanuel, we be without God. ‘Without him in this world,’ saith the Apostle; and if without him in this, without Him in the next; and if without Him there—if it be not *Immanu-el*, it will be *Immanu-hell*; and that and no other place will fall, I fear me, to our share. Without him, this we are. What with Him? Why, if we have Him, and God by Him, we need no more; *Immanue-el* and *Immanu-all*.” “The Voice of Lancelot Andrewes in Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday*,” *Renascence* 58.2 (Winter 2005): 158. The passage may be found in *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity by the Right Honourable and Most Reverend Father in God Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden, and Welsh, 1887): 142.

69 “But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.” 1 Corinthians 1:27.
there is no opposition between the speaker and his God that needs to be overcome by his own effort: there is no need to escape from a corrupted world if that is the world in which his God has made himself manifest. “Still:” not only in repose but still present, still enduring within the world—the Word resounds despite the speaker’s inability to hear it. The Incarnation collapses the binary opposition between transcendence and immanence, overcoming the resistance of human sin of God’s own accord and as God’s free gift.70 No amount of spinning speech can effectively oppose itself to this Word. The unstilled world may “whirl” against it, yet human speech and action are still dependent on the ontological primacy of divine action: even in opposition to the Word the world still spins “about the centre” of its immovable axis.

What follows is an intrusive allusion to the sound of God’s own voice. This is the voice that the speaker would not allow to rattle his bones in the second section, but which here might make its claim upon him. “O my people, what have I done unto thee” appears in God’s admonishment of Israel through another prophet, Micah; God reminds his people that they are constituted as persons and as a nation by God’s own action: “For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.”71 But though the divine address is registered in the text, it is plainly “unheard” by the speaker at this point. As in the second poem, the momentum of his mind precludes his recognition of a divine word irrupting here. Rather he prattles on, instantiating the very conditions he laments: “where will the word / Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.” More pointedly, this speaker retains the right to delimit the possibility of God’s

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70 Eliot would later write in East Coker that the Incarnation’s intersection of the timeless and time was only for the saints to grasp: only they pursue it as a full-time job. For the rest of us, incarnation would remain “the hint half guessed, the gift half understood” (CP, 198-9).

71 Micah 6:4, Authorized Version.
appearance in the fallen world: he retroactively refuses to accord God the power to be made manifest in God’s own creation.

The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice

The jangling internal rhymes suggest the combinatory compulsion of a mind terrified of silence; yet this section also recounts the slow accrual of awareness that this language could be turned to other ends if he could only let go of his habitual insistence on the autonomy of his own voice: “Will the veiled sister pray,” the speaker will ask, “for those who offend her / And are terrified and cannot surrender”?

What offends her? The speaker’s implicit rejection of the validity of God’s speech and action in history: for within the tradition that Eliot has joined, God has spoken through the prophets to claim a chosen people (“O my people”); more central to the Christian tradition, the Word is made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. In an incarnational frame, time and space are the dimensions of God’s action—God’s ontologically primary action that invites and demands human response. What must be surrendered? The speaker’s agentive control over “the right time and the right place” in which the word may be heard. Insisting that “there is not enough silence” for the word to be heard, the speaker claims as a creature the power to oppose or refuse the action of his creator. Moreover, the specifically verbal nature of the Incarnation—“the Word within / the world and for the world”—calls into question the speaker’s claim to a right of refusal. The language that the speaker has consistently deployed as a defense against grace becomes legible as the means by which God has already broken down that barrier.
The speaker then immediately asks for the intercession of Mary for those who continue to insist upon an understanding of conversion as the choice of an autonomous human agent, who are unable to surrender to God’s primary action in grace.

Will the veiled sister pray for
Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and oppose thee,
Those who are torn on the horn between season and season, time and time, between
Hour and hour, word and word, power and power, those who wait
In darkness? Will the veiled sister pray
For children at the gate
Who will not go away and cannot pray:
Pray for those who chose and oppose

O my people, what have I done unto thee.

The first petition here, on its face, is for hypocrites: those who “chose” the way of faith but who deny it by their deeds. Like Eliot’s speaker, they profess the power of Christ; they witness to the Word; yet they are “torn.” They oscillate always between, on the one hand, an affirmation of God’s power and the wholeness of divine time, and, on the other, the daily practice of their own independence from God, the proud fantasy of personal autonomy. “It is a perverse kind of elevation indeed,” Augustine wrote, “to forsake the foundation upon which the mind should rest, and to become and remain, as it were, one’s own foundation.”

Yet in the penultimate line cited

72 For Augustine before him, pride was closely tied to the assumption of interpretive authority. Humans were made in God’s image and as part of the created order that signified the beauty and order of God; God built into human beings a corresponding order of loves, in which all things desired were desired in and for their being in this created order, as signs of the larger whole in God. In their decision to eat the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve had first to imagine themselves and their action apart from or outside that created order; they organized their actions, too, towards a private good that was not a sign of God’s goodness, but of their own independence. “And what is pride,” Augustine wrote, but an appetite for a perverse kind of elevation? For it is a perverse kind of elevation indeed to forsake the foundation upon which the mind should rest, and to become and remain, as it were, one’s own foundation.” The City of God Against the Pagans, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 1998) 14:13, 608.

The garden in that moment ceased to be for them a sphere of divine care and provision, becoming instead a site of their self-consciously independent action: like Othello, they abstracted themselves from the moral order in order to dramatize themselves against their environment. For more on the privacy of pride, see R.A. Markus, “Augustine: A Defense of Christian Mediocrity” in The End of Ancient Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 45-62 and Jennifer Herdt, “Disordered Loves and the Problem of
here, Eliot effects a subtle but crucial shift that redirects the reader’s focus from the object—whom is chosen and whom opposed—to choosing and opposing as acts in themselves: he repeats the earlier petition but eliminates the qualifier of “those” (“who walk in darkness”) and, more importantly, the direct object of “chose” and “oppose”—“thee.” The newly proximate triple rhyme of “those” / “chose” / “oppose” suggests their interdependence: pray for those, the speaker asks, whose subjectivity and epistemology are predicated on their sequestration within themselves and the operation of a private, sovereign will; pray for those who insist on their independence from God and the order of God’s creation. To imagine that one could “choose” God—from “one’s own foundation,” to imagine that one has real alternatives—is to oppose oneself to God.

For Eliot, God has entered this world; Christ has redeemed history. Any Manichaean ascesis that sees this world as only a sphere of sin and corruption is, finally, another form of spiritual pride. The early sections diagnose such counterfeits of piety in the reasoned torpor of the agèd eagle, in the chirping of bones “glad to be scattered.” Here the poem moves toward an even more unsettling diagnosis: conversion—conceived of as a moment of sincere profession—is itself a counterfeit, a fetish that stands as a protective obstacle between the speaker and the object of his desire and terror.

Will the veiled sister between the slender Yew trees pray for those who offend her And are terrified and cannot surrender And affirm before the world and deny between the rocks In the last desert between the last blue rocks The desert in the garden the garden in the desert Of drouth, spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed.

The speaker’s prayer here is not for the strength to overcome sin—for the perfection of his will to surrender, and affirm, and spit out the seed of the first forbidden fruit.\(^73\) This speaker cannot disavow his own separation from God by reinscribing his own sovereignty: such an act would make an end-run around the incarnational means by which God has reconciled the world to Godself. This prayer is rather a plea to be fit within a narrative of which he is neither the author nor the protagonist: a plea to be not the agent but the patient. The garden and the desert, both places of temptation, are both also sites of absolute dependence upon God’s provision. In the wilderness Israel belonged to God alone: after the rise of kings and the corruption of the kingdom, both God and Israel looked back to their forty years wandering in the wilderness as a time of intimacy. As Helen Gardner has written, the desert was to Eliot, “the symbol of solitude and silence which may become a place of sanctity, the desert of the desert fathers.”\(^74\) This prayer is for help in inhabiting an incarnational world: the desert in the garden—a world that condemns itself to be a desert to the extent that it imagines its own material and intellectual fecundity to be sufficient unto itself—that is at once the garden in the desert: a wasteland in which Christ has nonetheless deigned to dwell and so dignified as a realm of continued spiritual potential and encounter.\(^75\)

In contrast to the opening of Ash-Wednesday, in which the speaker had announced his own stoic obstinacy over against the mutable world of the “usual reign” (“Because I do not hope

\(^73\) For again, as Augustine stressed, in eating that fruit Adam and Eve sinned most fundamentally in presuming a private interiority, a sovereign will apart from the order of God’s creation.

\(^74\) “The Landscapes of Eliot’s Poetry,” Critical Quarterly 10.4 (1968): 318. For those desert fathers, as Thomas Merton noted, the desert was “the logical dwelling place for the man who seeks to be nothing but himself—that is to say, a creature solitary and poor and dependent upon no one but God, with no great project standing between himself and his Creator.” Thoughts in Solitude (New York: Noonday Press / FSG, 1958): 19.

\(^75\) The concept of the via media was and is central to the Anglican tradition; Eliot wrote in For Lancelot Andrewes that this middle way “is of all ways the most difficult to follow. It requires discipline and self-control, it requires both imagination and hold on reality.” “John Bramhall,” FLA: 42.
to turn again”), in the poem’s final section the speaker’s confesses the mutability of his own will and the inevitability of his habitual turn away from God’s redemptive presence.

Although I do not hope to turn again
Although I do not hope
Although I do not hope to turn

Although he hopes he won’t, he will. The next stanza describes such a turning. The speaker is drawn again into zero-sum thinking in which conversion means a turning away, a loss of the world:

Wavering between the profit and the loss
In this brief transit where the dreams cross
This dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying
(Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things

What distinguishes this turning inward from the poem’s first section is its humility and self-consciousness: the speaker acknowledges his habitual recourse to a choice that he can make (“the profit and the loss”) and confesses his inability to order his own desires, to order his attention. As Helen Gardner has argued, “There comes over him, as an almost overpowering temptation, the memory of the pure happiness of the summers of his boyhood, spent from 1893 to 1911 in the house that his father, an exile from New England, built at Gloucester, Massachusetts, near Cape Ann.”76 He asks for God’s help: he does not want to invest in his desire for a return to “the granite shore” where “The white sails still fly eastward, seaward flying / Unbroken wings;” and yet that desire is present and must be faced.

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
Quickens to recover
The cry of quail and the whirling plover
And the blind eye creates

76 Gardner, 319.
The empty forms between the ivory gates
And the smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth

The temptation of which Gardner speaks—and of which Eliot’s speaker is here all too aware—is the temptation to take refuge from the tensions of the present spiritual life in memories of sensory and aesthetic immediacy: to “recover / The cry of quail and the whirling plover.”

The reader’s temptation is perhaps to read this confession as a punitive, world-denying impulse on the part of the speaker: the smell of the lilac and the echoing voices along the seashore are “lost”—never to be recovered—and the heart that rejoices in them is also therefore “lost”—spiritually adrift. There is undoubtedly a mourning quality to these lines that suggests that speaker has indeed “turned again,” turned his attention toward a remembered world that he would prefer to his present discipline. Yet the speaker then enacts another turn, recentering his attention on the present moment of prayer; and the speaker’s renewed attention on this moment of devotional address includes and reframes that remembered scene as also a place of divine presence. For his concluding address to the Virgin Mary invokes her traditional title as Stella Maris, “Star of the Sea,” patron of seafarers. The speaker’s prayer is for a more disciplined attention. He would not be distracted from his devotion by vivid memories. Yet this prayer also enacts a form of spiritual discipline by which even speaker’s distant, pre-conversion past—the content of that distraction—is reconceived as a site of God’s presence and providence.

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will

77 Eliot expanded on this Marian connection with the landscape of Cape Ann in The Dry Salvages, especially in the fourth section, which invokes the stella maris theme from the Salve Regina: “Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory, / Pray for all those who are in ships, those / Whose business has to do with fish, and / Those concerned with every lawful traffic / And those who conduct them.”
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.

Eliot prays that he would not be separated now, even as he implicitly affirms that he was not separated from her even then, along the rocky coast of northern Massachusetts.

_Suffer us not; suffer me not_ : the archaic liturgical phrasing invokes a complicated play of power between the speaker and his addressee. On the one hand, the imperative is premised on the minimal claim that the speaker makes on the attention of the lady, who must “suffer” him, suffer a fool. The transitive sense of the verb affirms the humility of the speaker imploring that she endure the affront of his “falsehood,” his proud illusion of independence that perpetuates the separation of sin. On the other hand, in the accusative sense, in which “suffer” means “allow” or “permit,” he admits that he is unable to achieve truth or union alone and requires the generous action of the lady to prevent him from going astray.

Acknowledging that it is a poem dramatizing error and riven by ironic self-castigation, Eliot’s critics have asked of _Ash-Wednesday_, and by extension, of Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism: is it, or was it, sincere?\(^7\) At this point, I hope it is clear that this is exactly the wrong tack to take. For sincerity is premised on this cathartic model that prizes unattainable purities—purity of self-presence, purity of intention. In its conventional connotation, sincerity depends upon a concept of speech and action as expressive acts of a subject fully present to his

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or her intentions and fully master of them.\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ash-Wednesday} dramatizes the breakdown of this model of the subject: the speaker’s efforts to strip away the contingent and the personal in order to attain such purity became a self-sustaining cycle that drew him out of the world where God is manifest. The poem dramatizes conversion not as a crisis that leads to an act of sincere assent or settled conviction into “point of view,” but as a continuing process of discipline that fits the subject into a narrative organized around God’s being and action. As a result, Eliot’s conversion implies not a cathartic experience of sincere desire, but a faithful process by which that desire is formed, by which “intellectual assent” is formed into a positive desire. Eliot invokes the necessity of a humble and disciplined attention to the Incarnational connection that suffuses and overcomes even those barriers he habitually raises around himself. The discipline of liturgy and devotion allows him to “sit still” long enough to call his habitually active, separating self into question and to understand his own being and action as always responsive to the primary action of God’s provision and grace.

\textbf{iii: Eliot’s Indecision}

In the midst of his reflection on irony in “Four Master Tropes,” Kenneth Burke remarked that “Eliot’s problem in religion has resided precisely in his attempt to convert romantic irony into classic irony, really to replace a state of ‘superiority’ by a state of ‘humility.’”\textsuperscript{80} As I have tried to elucidate in this reading of \textit{Ash-Wednesday}, that transformation is the end toward which the poem is organized. The poem serves as a revisionist account of Eliot’s conversion as he had presented it in the preface to \textit{For Lancelot Andrewes}: as he reflected before an audience at the

\textsuperscript{79} The appeal of this expressive conception is most apparent in our everyday excuses: I didn’t \textit{mean} what I said; I didn’t \textit{mean} to do it (but I did). Responsibility is relativized by a question of intention.

\textsuperscript{80} Kenneth Burke, “Four Master Tropes,” \textit{The Kenyon Review} 3.4 (Autumn 1941): 431-38; 434-5. Burke’s aside was directed toward \textit{Murder in the Cathedral}, but I find it applicable to \textit{Ash-Wednesday} as well.
University of Virginia in 1933, that statement was “injudicious” in its suggestion “that the Faith
is a political principle or a literary fashion, and the sum of all a dramatic posture.”\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ash-
Wednesday} begins by dramatizing the failure of just such posturing, and takes the speaker’s
inclination toward a cathartic break from the world as an index of his need for discipline. As the
rest of the poem unfolds, “the Faith” appears as an ethical hermeneutic that situates its humbled
speaker within the world that his God has entered and redeemed.

Yet the cathartic impulse never went away. The desire for purity and order never faded,
and he never rid himself of the temptation to describe the view from the mountain-top of the
corrupted world below. He thought increasingly about the ends—what Dante would have called
the \textit{final causes}—of his habits, his criticism, and the society in which he lived. He also looked
back to an imagined past, unable to let go of his fantasy of a homogeneous culture where he
would be at home, on the terms of his own choosing. By way of conclusion, I turn to those 1933
Page-Barbour lectures at the University of Virginia (later published as \textit{After Strange Gods}) to
briefly consider the effects of his indecision between these two hermeneutics on his social and
political theorizing in the 1930s and on his “religion” more broadly.

Eliot had been invited by the lectures’ convener to respond specifically to the thesis of
\textit{I’ll Take My Stand}—that the Old South had preserved the conditions under which a cultural
tradition could survive and thrive, and that those conditions ought to be recreated. Eliot took the
occasion to revise the account of “tradition” he had offered almost fifteen years prior in
“Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In 1919 he had defined it as a dynamically adaptive and
yet “simultaneous order” of literary works; in 1933 he broadened its meaning to a largely
unconscious mode of being and acting that brings together the thoughts and feelings of
individuals and binds them into a community that spans generations. “What I mean by tradition

\textsuperscript{81} CPCE v: 25.
involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of ‘the same people living in the same place.’”\textsuperscript{82} And he concurred with the Twelve Southerners that if a healthy tradition could be reestablished in any place, it would be more likely in the American South than in the Yankee New England with which Eliot affiliated himself.\textsuperscript{83} “You are farther away from New York,” Eliot reasoned; “you have been less industrialised and less invaded by foreign races; and you have more opulent soil.”\textsuperscript{84}

Eliot thus began his discussion of tradition with a cathartic frame in its most vulgar form: an appeal to purity, to origins, to blood and soil. And to that frame he would return. Yet it also true that in the larger argument Eliot would advancing, a tradition was authorized not by its origins in a rooted group of people, but by its relationship to an end, a “final cause” that Eliot calls orthodoxy. Eliot of course thought of himself as theologically orthodox and had committed himself to the ultimate truth of Christian doctrine. In this setting however he was not interested in theological arguments, so he defined orthodoxy more abstractly: as an affirmation of human weakness, prejudice, and conceit, and the location of human dignity in the moral struggle to hold to the good, suffering continual correction from the moral and spiritual authorities provided in one’s society. This, for Eliot, always had been and always would be true. A healthy tradition is one that functions as a means of social discipline. A tradition is necessary because individuals are not innately prepared to recognize, maintain, and further build up the good on their own. Even a fully formed intellectual framework for such social value is insufficient to ensure their

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{CPCE} v: 19.
\textsuperscript{83} Eliot in fact repeated, in his own words, Ransom’s central thesis, that the “long struggle of adaptation between man and his environment has brought out the best qualities of both” (18).
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{CPCE} v: 18.
practice: one can know right and not act right. A body of norms, rites, and rituals is necessary to cultivate habits that guide people in the moral struggles that give their choices meaning.

Eliot’s revised idea of tradition can thus be read as an attempt to abstract and apply Eliot’s thinking in *Ash-Wednesday* to social policy. Tradition, in other words, is also legible within Foucault’s ethical hermeneutic, as a technology by which a group of people might discover and pursue the best form of communal life for themselves: not as a political abstraction, Eliot stressed, but as a lived reality. As such, an extant tradition does not serve as an authority in and of itself, to be thoughtlessly defended. “It is not of advantage to us to indulge a sentimental attitude toward the past,” Eliot wrote.

For one thing, in even the very best living tradition there is always a mixture of good and bad, and much that deserves criticism; and for another, tradition is not a matter of feeling alone. Nor can we safely, without very critical examination, dig ourselves in stubbornly to a few dogmatic notions, for what is a healthy belief at one time may, unless it is one of the few fundamental things, be a pernicious prejudice at another. Nor should we cling to traditions as a way of asserting our superiority over less favoured peoples. What we can do is use our minds, remembering that a tradition without intelligence is not worth having, to discover what is the best life for us not as a political abstraction, but as a particular people in a particular place; what in the past is worth preserving and what should be rejected; and what conditions, within our power to bring about, would foster the society that we desire.  

Deprived of context this passage seems to me to present an eminently reasonable relationship to the past, with an orientation toward doing what is feasible to achieve a collective future. Its social imaginary is a messy and ambivalent: realist. We may use our intelligence, however, to decide which habits and practices can be used and which are best discarded in building up the forms of life we desire—not as an abstraction, but as a lived reality—and which, by default, we do not yet inhabit. To explore a counterfactual, if by “a particular people living in a particular place” Eliot had simply meant the extant group of people living together in Charlottesville or Boston or London in 1933 (no doubt far more diverse than those in the audience) and all fully

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85 *CPCE* v: 19-20.
empowered to speak, this could have been a compelling frame for a rich ethical and political discourse. What kind of practices would be necessary in order to turn us into the kind of people who could live that “best life” as we have collectively imagined it?

And yet, of course, “reasons of race and religion combined” to make Eliot’s concept of tradition doubly problematic. Eliot in fact held an explicitly racialized idea of “a particular people living in a particular place;” his blithe deflection of theological arguments was an index of his confidence in arrogating political authority to his kind of people: “orthodox” Christians. But the counterfactual draws our attention to a sudden shift in Eliot’s political hermeneutics at this moment in the lecture. At the end of the passage I have quoted above, Eliot abandons the question of how to appropriate the resources of the past to bring a complex and manifestly imperfect present closer to “the society we desire.” He takes up, instead, his own counterfactuals: to achieve the conditions under which a “traditional society” would be possible would require a break from the swiftly-moving modern world and the purification of its diverse population. We cannot start from the world as it is. Eliot continues directly:

Stability is obviously necessary. You are hardly likely to develop tradition except where the bulk of the population is relatively so well off where it is that it has no incentive or pressure to move about. The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable. 86

Eliot indulges here in a fantasy of Christendom on a local, communitarian scale: a pre-modern idyll of unified sensibility. 87 It is a universalism on Eliot’s own terms—a universalism for which

86 CPCE v: 20.
87 In his hesitation to come right out and equate his concept of “orthodoxy” with Christian doctrine, Eliot later had to fall back on defining “heresy” as betrayal not of beliefs, but on an “orthodoxy of sensibility and...the sense of tradition, our degree of approaching ‘that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead.’” CPCE v: 31.
Eliot establishes the boundaries. A universalism paradoxically defined against a parochial, Judaized Other.

Both Bryan Cheyette and Jonathan Freedman have stressed that Eliot’s anti-Semitism can be read as a reaction-formation to the Arnoldian idea of the writer, artist or critic as structurally alienated from the Philistine world—a position “homologous with, and at other times identical to, that figure most fully identified by their culture as the prime Other, the Jew.” In Eliot’s early poetry and some of his letters, the figure of the Jew is appetitive, bestial, gross, in decay: “The rats are underneath the piles. / The Jew is underneath the lot.” The figure of the Jew is planted, inexorable there: by contrast, the cool and cosmopolitan irony of Eliot’s verse is impossible to pin down. After his conversion, however, Eliot inverts the valence of his anti-Semitic projection, remobilizing it toward the threat posed to his ideal of tradition by just such an independent sophisticate, unwilling to assimilate to the “people” or to commit to the “place.” It is difficult to gauge whether Eliot thought such assimilation would in fact be possible. In some ways it does

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88 Freedman, 51.
90 Cheyette, 207. Cheyette reads all of Eliot’s national, political, and religious commitments as an effort to oppose the disruptive and disorderly liberal individualism that he classed as “Jewish” and which he feared that he embodied.
91 Eliot was mobilizing an anti-Semitic discourse at a time of a conceptual transition, which included a new ideology of “race” that had not existed when Arnold wrote Culture and Anarchy. The synonymy of “race” and “blood” in Eliot’s Page-Barbour lecture (and his strong association between “blood” and geographical territory) suggests that his racial imaginary was continuous with nineteenth-century modes of anthropological and biological classification. Though race was a new, quasi-scientific category, it was broadly continuous with the distinctions of tribe or “nation” (Franks, Saxons, Normans, Celts) that it replaced: races were thought to share inherent psychical and psychological traits and belonged together within a geographical territory. Modern nationalism to an extent exploited these elisions. Jews, of course, were a nation without a homeland, and as such posed a threat to this modern idea of the nation from two opposing angles. On the one hand, Jews represented the limits of citizenship: they were permanent resident aliens that threatened the “natural” cohesion of the nation. On the other hand, Jews represented the threat that such permanent aliens could and would assimilate, becoming indistinguishable from the “natives.” Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000 [1989]).
Paradoxically, the possible success of liberal citizenship spurred on the development of a new architecture of racial difference, in which racist ideology could be legitimated by scientific knowledge of “objective” racial types and an “objective” evaluation of their desirable and undesirable characteristics.
not matter as much as the fact that Eliot arrogated to himself the privilege of deciding if and when and how Jews would be accepted into his ideal society.  

Eliot’s anti-Semitic discourse can also be read, however, as part of his reaction against the liberal Protestant theology that Arnold imported into “culture.” The first irony in this reaction is that Eliot’s rhetorical mobilization of anti-Semitism was a point of continuity with the liberalism he contested. We have already seen how both Schleiermacher’s Protestant modernism and Arnold’s liberal culture required for their definition parochial, obstinate Others, and that they both cast Jews in this role.

The second irony is that Eliot’s protest against liberal theology and culture assumed its conceptual frame. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I argued that Schleiermacher’s significant intervention in the discourse of religion was to define his own ideal of liberal religion—Protestant Christianity—as a particular interpretive relationship to its own historical tradition (and to all other historical faith traditions). This “good” religion, as Schleiermacher defined it, required “bad” religion—a credulous, propositional belief—as its other and as its object. To be religious meant to read historical religions critically and, in pursuing the ineffable state of receptivity to the universe that informed those traditions and in time had been obscured by them, to establish one’s superiority over against those who merely took the traditions at face value. It was a supersession narrative, drawing on Paul and other New Testament writers, who

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Such a science of eugenics could be used to re-shape nature according to human reason and design, “to assist it in its drive to self-perfection” (Bauman, 70). In 1933, just such an architecture was being institutionalized within the bureaucratic structure of a modern state: Nazi Germany. Though Eliot was at pains to disavow it later, there is terror in Eliot’s suggestion that “the population should be homogeneous.”

“Needless to say, from a Jewish point of view,” Freedman writes, “the problem in his response, phrased in the most appalling terms in his lecture but evident in a more benign guise in the letters to Jews, is his need to label, identify, or define for Jews what their Jewishness should consist of, to tell Jews how they should act in the modern world. It’s this that I mean by a structural anti-Semitism, one which is quite compatible with philo-Semitism and one that, indeed, often encompasses it” (428-9).
had defined the “New Covenant” against the “Old,” Schleiermacher assigned to “believers” the role assigned to the Jews in the early church—as those who refused to acknowledge the truth of the Risen Christ, stubbornly clinging to letter against the spirit. In the second chapter, I argued that Arnold imported this supersessionist frame into his theory of culture and what we now think of as “literary” history. Arnold criticized the narrow enthusiasm and obedient, mechanical action of his evangelical contemporaries as “Hebraism,” believing that the spiritual value of strict conscience needed to be subsumed under a culture organized by playful, free, and life-affirming “Hellenism.” Hebraism could be integrated into culture, but it needed to be governed by the dispassionate criticism of those with “flexibility, perceptiveness, and judgment.”

Eliot’s reaction against this narrative of historical rupture simply repeated it in different terms. Where liberals wrote a narrative of supersession, Eliot saw a narrative of secularization. Eliot all too eagerly took on the role of the defender of the “old” tradition over against the new, an ignored orthodoxy over against an atomizing individualism and a secularism that cheapened the lives of those individuals.93

I have argued that one problem with 19th century liberal theology was that its oppositional structure relieved it of the responsibility for a positive doctrine. Perhaps its methodological commitment to the criticism of “religion” that misunderstood itself as propositional doctrine made such a doctrine impossible. Eliot defined liberalism as “a movement not so much defined by its end, as by its starting point; away from, rather than towards, something definite.”94

93 The next year, Eliot wrote, “the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life: of something which I assume to be our primary concern.” “Religion and Literature,” CPCE v: 225.
This is a compelling critique of the cathartic drive in liberalism that seeks ever greater negative freedom. As he actually proposed it, however, Eliot’s “traditional” or “Christian” society—his alternative, anti-libERAL universalism—is vulnerable to the same critique. Eliot’s religion—like Schleiermacher’s—is structurally polemical: it requires a target, an object against which it defines itself and the criticism of which defines its primary mode of being. For Schleiermacher, that object was propositional religious belief; for Eliot, that object was liberalism in its ethical, political, and theological forms. Liberal hegemony gave him a consistent target for his laments, and also relieved him of the responsibility for formulating an actual program by which the society he desired might be achieved. There were resources in his thinking for such an ethical hermeneutic, and he dramatized the efficacy of discipline in his own spiritual life in *Ash-Wednesday*. But he never applied those insights to his social criticism. He tried only to effect a change in others’ “point of view.”
Coda: Faithful Readings, For Now

“I take it criticism is a skill which as it deepens and grows habitual becomes to some degree a routine of second nature and which, when irritated in argument, sometimes pleads itself as second sight. It becomes, as we say, unconscious, so crowded it is with intuition, and cries in the dark, crowding its darkness into the blaze of noon. …Philosophy has the business of bringing back across the threshold of consciousness, back into the story of the whole mind, the reflective power which had thickened into habit.”

– R.P. Blackmur

This dissertation is a contribution to the business Blackmur calls philosophy. In the preceding chapters on Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks, this dissertation has attempted to illuminate the multiple and competing forms of faith manifest in their habits of criticism. It has argued that these forms of faith and the hermeneutics that reflected and sustained them were entangled in a powerful and problematic theological tradition called Protestant modernism, an inheritance that has been obscured by the discipline’s ahistorical concept of religion as propositional belief. In emphasizing these entanglements, I have not tried to reveal that the discipline of literary study is, deep down, an irreducibly Protestant enterprise: it is just such a move to identify the essence beneath the occluding surface that I have attempted to historicize. These chapters pursue a more modest aim: to provide rich accounts of the problems these critics were trying to solve in light of their multiple fidelities and the interpretive methods they developed to solve them (and, at times—especially in the cases of Arnold and Eliot—to guard against their solution).

At the conclusion of this work that has attempted to think about literary and religious hermeneutics together, I want to reflect very briefly on the discipline’s habit of thinking of them

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as opposed, and more broadly on its habitual opposition between critical and uncritical reading.

As Michael Warner has written, this opposition is fundamental to the institutionalized profession of literary study and its pedagogies:

“We tend to assume that critical reading is just a name for any self-conscious practice of reading. This assumption creates several kinds of fallout at once: It turns all reading into the uncritical material for an ever-receding horizon of reflective self-positing; by naturalizing critical reading as mere reflection it obscures from even our own view the rather elaborate forms and disciplines of subjectivity we practice and inculcate; it universalizes the special form of modernity that unites philology with the public sphere; and it blocks from view the existence of other cultures of textualism. In these ways it could be called a mistake or an ideology, but of course it is also the internal viewpoint of a culture with its own productive intensities, its own distinctive paradoxes, enabling even this essay, for better or worse.”

If this project has a methodological argument, it is that our discipline’s past would be more useful and the quality of ongoing debates over “how we read now” would be improved if this dichotomy were abandoned and replaced by a set of questions about how different readings might be faithful to different commitments (and multiple commitments simultaneously) and how those forms of fidelity create different “productive intensities.” How is a reading faithful or unfaithful to the text—as conceived as an object with particular value or salient characteristics within a particular institution or community? How is it faithful or unfaithful to methods of interpretation or inquiry sanctioned by that community, or to those of the public it aims to engage? How is it faithful to an ethic that prescribes and proscribes particular acts and dispositions—certain forms of agency and discipline—in accordance with its vision of the good?

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3 I refer to the unresolved controversy over “surface reading” and “suspicious reading” stirred up nearly a decade ago by special issue of Representations devoted to “The Way We Read Now,” Steven Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” Representations 108, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 1-21. However I would make the same suggestion for related and unrelated debates that have been ongoing during the time this project was being written, including but not limited to enchanted reading, the future of critique, distant reading and the digital humanities, New Formalism, and object-oriented ontology.
Such questions might also further open the discipline to learning from the interpretive practices of other reading communities. Warner helpfully proposes that different interpretive methodologies could be distinguished “as contrasting ways in which various techniques and forms can be embedded in an ethical problematic of subject-formation—in the case of critical reading, one oriented to freedom and autonomous agency against the background of a modern social imaginary.”

Rather than categorizing unfamiliar reading practices (religious or otherwise) as naïve or stubbornly resistant to the particular habits of analysis and self-reflexivity valorized within our own discipline, we might ask what sort of work they aim to do in the world and how they work over their practitioners. Furthermore, we might risk being more explicit about our own commitments, and how we expect to be formed as ethical subjects by even our most familiar reading practices.

This project has been shaped by my commitment to broaden my own ethical imagination: to engage in interpretive practices that are faithful not only to my own freedom and autonomy, but also to my desire to engage more habitually in acts of solidarity, postures of vulnerability, and works of love. I can say in humility that such acts do not come as “naturally” as I would wish: my ideal ethical self will not be revealed by removing obstacles or barriers to my agency.

Such a change in my habits requires discipline—the subordination of my own agency to unfamiliar forms in order to realize what those forms make possible. Whatever becomes of this

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4 “Uncritical Reading,” 19.
5 I am not saying that agency is unimportant or a second-class ethical good; I am saying that the liberation of all persons from every form of oppression and domination is imperative and also insufficient to the ethical and political task of building a just earth: liberation is one among many ethical and political ends.
6 This is why, to return to the unresolved question of the Eliot chapter, I am more compelled by the narrative of his conversion that focuses on his long and equivocal discipline by the liturgical forms of the Anglo-Catholic tradition: reading them out loud, bringing them into his body. I willingly grant that the cathartic frame is also persuasive, and I keep Eliot’s passion for purity and his rage for order very much in
project and its questions, I hope that it will be formed in service of a truth that cannot be only
known, but must be lived.
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