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Faith positions: Re-reading gender, race, and Christianity in nineteenth-century American women's writing

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Abstract
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As Jenny Franchot and Carolyn Haynes (among others) have noted, contemporary American literary scholarship tends to evade concerns of religion and belief. "About those who 'had it' [religious belief] in the past," Franchot writes, "scholars often write either 'around' the belief (as if belief stays bottled up within a denominational container and never tinctures a person's greater reality) or isolate it as a deviant element to be extracted for diagnostic analysis." Within the specific field of nineteenth-century American literature, Haynes identifies a similar trend among scholars "either to view Protestantism as a purely debilitating or a merely utilitarian force, or, to ignore its presence and effects altogether."

Faith Positions is designed to address this "studied neglect" of religion (as Franchot labels it) on several levels. By focusing on African- and Anglo-American women writers, I am able to examine the nature of belief as a dynamic positioning force that intersects directly with other positioning forces, particularly those determined by gender and race. And, by organizing my study across a range of these "faith positions," I am able to work beyond the usual binaries---assimilation vs. resistance, for instance---to explore the varied and complex roles of religious belief in shaping personal, social, and even national identities. Perhaps not surprisingly, each of these writers exposes in her text(s) the limitations of a dominant narrative of white, middle-class, male Protestantism. Still, as a careful examination of their work reveals, each in turn engages and repositions the theological foundations of that narrative. Read together, they raise intriguing questions about the role of religion in transforming cultural ideas (and ideals), and in constructing an identifiably "American" national identity.

Keywords
Literature, American, Women's Studies, Religion, General
FAITH POSITIONS:
RE-READING GENDER, RACE, AND CHRISTIANITY IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING

BY

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DISSERTATION

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in
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In her 1897 memoir, *Chapters from a Life*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps writes of her childhood theological training in particular, "I may not always believe all I was taught, but what I was taught has helped me to what I believe." Similarly, *Faith Positions* reflects a years-long process of formal education and personal discovery; and in its pages are the echoes of many people who have "helped me to what I believe." In the early years of my masters' studies at Boston College, Professor John Mahoney was a singular voice in encouraging my interest in the intersections of literature and religion, and he remains today a model of scholarly commitment to such interests, for which I am so grateful. My professors at the University of New Hampshire have offered resounding support and encouragement as well. Melody Graulich was invaluable to me in helping to broaden and shape my understanding of nineteenth-century American women's literature in particular, and she offered wise and generous advice in the earliest stages of this project. Lisa MacFarlane, in turn, helped me work toward a more comprehensive understanding of the role of religion in nineteenth-century America, and she brought her characteristic enthusiasm, incisiveness, and clear-sighted intelligence to this project as a whole. I thank her for seeing *Faith Positions* through from its first inception. Briggs Bailey and Sarah Sherman were careful, respectful readers of this study, and each offered both keen insights and sound advice at key stages in the overall process. And David Frankfurter's questions and suggestions provided useful perspective from outside the field of literary studies. Last, but certainly not least, John Ernest helped me to develop a methodology for this project that
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University of New Hampshire, December 2001

*Faith Positions* is a study of the ways in which various modes of nineteenth-century religious belief are intertwined with the strained threads of an "American" national narrative. Specifically, I focus on the texts of four nineteenth-century American women -- Jarena Lee, Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Frances Harper -- to consider the ways in which religious belief, and the narratives shaped by belief, respond to experiences defined by gender and race.

As Jenny Franchot and Carolyn Haynes (among others) have noted, contemporary American literary scholarship tends to evade concerns of religion and belief. "About those who 'had it' [religious belief] in the past," Franchot writes, "scholars often write either 'around' the belief (as if belief stays bottled up within a denominational container and never tinctures a person's greater reality) or isolate it as a deviant element to be extracted for diagnostic analysis." Within the specific field of nineteenth-century American literature, Haynes identifies a similar trend among scholars "either to view Protestantism as a purely debilitating or a merely utilitarian force, or, to ignore its presence and effects altogether."

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INTRODUCTION

At the National Convention of Colored Citizens held in Buffalo, NY, in August 1843, a series of resolutions was adopted regarding "the church" in the United States, and "church relations" between free blacks and "the leading ecclesiastical bodies" of the country. The first of these resolutions makes a clear and precise distinction between forms of Christianity in the U.S. "Resolved," it reads, "That we believe in the true Church of Christ, and that it will stand while time endures, and that it will evince its spirit by its opposition to all sins, and especially to the sin of slavery, which is a compound of all others, and that the great mass of American sects, falsely called churches, which apologize for slavery and prejudice, or practice slaveholding, are in truth no churches, but Synagogues of Satan." The second resolution, in turn, underscores this distinction: "Resolved, That we solemnly believe that slaveholding and prejudice sustaining ministers and churches (falsely so called), are the greatest enemies to Christ and to civil and religious liberty in the world." The third and fourth resolutions thus conclude "That the colored people in the free States who belong to pro-slavery sects that will not pray for the oppressed ... are guilty of enslaving themselves and others," and therefore, "That it is the bounden duty of every person to come out from among those religious organizations in which they are not permitted to enjoy equality" ("Minutes" 15).1

1 As Howard Holman Bell notes in his Introduction to Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions 1830-1864, the National Convention met twelve times between 1830 and 1864, with the design "to lift the entire black population -- slave and nominally free -- to a position of equality under constitutional government" (iv). Over the course of more than thirty years, participants in the convention included the Reverend Richard Allen, James W.C. Pennington, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin R. Delaney, and Frederick Douglass. I am indebted to John Ernest for introducing me to the published proceedings of
"Minutes," too, emphasize the discrepancy that the delegates intended to make clear. In debating the exact terms of the first resolution in particular, the Minutes explain, the delegates "all agreed in the existence of the church, but a difference of opinion existed as to what constituted the true church" (emphasis added). Still, the "Minutes" conclude, "They all agreed that the existing church in this country was corrupt" (11).

The discrepancy articulated in these resolutions -- between "the true Church of Christ" and "the great mass of American sects, falsely called churches" -- resonates in the narratives of nineteenth-century African American writers in particular. Perhaps the best known example of this is Frederick Douglass, whose 1845 *Narrative* provides my entrance into Chapter 1. In the Appendix to that *Narrative*, Douglass (who was a delegate to the 1843 National Convention above) makes a similar distinction between the "Christianity of this land" and the "Christianity of Christ." Harriet Jacobs, too, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), identifies "a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south" (emphasis added 74). But of course, as the 1843 National Convention resolutions emphasize, the corruption of "the existing church in this country" reaches beyond the experiences of the black population alone. These resolutions signal, in fact, the hypocrisy of an American (and thus, ideally democratic) church body that "discriminated between its members" (14), and that failed not only "to preach the truth in regard to the sin of slavery," but to "all other existing evils" as well (emphasis added 15). In this respect, the published resolutions underscore a discrepancy evident to many nineteenth-century Americans who had experienced notably "unchristian" prejudice and

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Ernest considers the National Convention proceedings in more detail in his forthcoming study on historical theory and African American writing.
neglect at the hands of "the church," but who in turn believed in the presence of "the true Church of Christ" in the world.

The acknowledgement of this discrepancy is, in many ways, the foundation of this study. Indeed, each of the women at the center of Faith Positions -- Jarena Lee, Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Frances E. W. Harper -- perceives a dominant form of Christianity that functions as a generalized (and often diminishing) cultural force. And yet, in turn, each woman in and through her writing demonstrates an understanding of belief as a dynamic positioning force that works both through and against the cultural institution of Christianity. Lee, for example, articulates the marked difference between a patriarchal black church that denies her equal participation as a woman, and the authorizing force of a divine call to preach. Davis, in turn, signals a discrepancy between the "ponderous Church creeds" and "somber Gothic pile" of an exclusive middle-class church, and the "slow, patient Christ-love" of an inclusive Quaker community. Phelps, similarly, marks the difference between "rich folks' religion" and "Christ's way." And Harper, too, makes a clear distinction between slaveholding "Christianity" and faith learned through suffering "at the foot of the cross." Each woman, that is, recognizes and exposes the severe limitations of "the existing church in this country," but for none of them is this exposure an end within itself. Rather, the discrepancy they see and experience becomes for each an entry point in seeking alternative expressions of belief in their particular world.

Remarkably, most contemporary scholars of nineteenth-century American literature do not make the same distinction that so many nineteenth-century writers did. Many are inclined, in fact, to collapse one meaning into the other: to equate the cultural institution of "the Church" with "Christianity," or the institutionalized force of "religion" with personal
(and personalized) "faith." More specifically, many scholars are inclined to see only one-half of the distinction — the corrupt and oppressive "Christianity of this land" — as representative of all "Christianity," and thus to assign limited choices (e.g. either full assimilation or complete resistance) to those who encounter "Christianity."

The consequence of this generalized understanding of "religion" or "Christianity" is that scholars tend either to evade the presence of religious experience and expression in literary texts -- focusing instead on the seemingly more distinct issues of race and gender -- or to dismiss such concerns of religion and belief as naive and/or debilitating. Frances Smith Foster identifies this tendency when she writes that "as readers we are too prone to assume that the way things are is better than, or at least the same as, the way things were."

"Since the gulf between the church and state, between belle lettres and best-sellers is large and enlarging, we have been content to assume it has always been so," she explains. And the result of "[s]uch ahistorical and overdisciplined ways of thinking," she maintains, is that "many of us in cultural studies ... walk past six storefront churches and two cathedrals while looking for a bar or rap group where we can get in touch with the 'real' folk" (Introduction, Minnie's Sacrifice xxxv). Jenny Franchot makes a similar observation.

"About those who 'had it' [religious belief] in the past," she writes, "scholars often write either 'around' the belief (as if belief stays bottled up within a denominational container and never tinctures a person's greater reality) or isolate it as a deviant element to be extracted for diagnostic analysis" ("Invisible Domain" 837). Indeed, what both Foster and Franchot suggest -- in perhaps simpler terms -- is that, somehow, when it comes to talking about religion from our early twenty-first-century perspective, the past is not what it used to
Faith Positions is designed to address this neglect of religion on several levels. In general terms, this is a study of the ways in which various modes of nineteenth-century religious belief are intertwined with the strained threads of an "American" national narrative. More specifically, I focus on the texts of four nineteenth-century American women to consider the ways in which religious belief, and the narratives shaped by belief, respond to experiences defined by gender, race, and ethnicity. These texts -- and the women who wrote them -- remind us that religious belief is more than just cultural "context" to self-identity, but rather a shaping force as integral to identity as race and gender. They reveal to us, that is, a more complex understanding of religious belief not as one static position -- or set of prescribed positions -- but rather as a dynamic positioning force that intersects with other cultural positioning forces.

The women at the heart of Faith Positions -- Lee, Davis, Phelps, and Harper -- are writers who have been "rediscovered" as recently as the 1970s and 80s. In this study, I argue that they need to be rediscovered yet again, this time with renewed attention to the ways in which each uses a specific, dynamic, and complex narrative of religious belief to

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2Foster's comments, especially, call to mind an apparent discrepancy between the contemporary scholarship of colonial literature -- literature, specifically, that pre-dates what she calls the enlarging "gulf between the church and state," and that also pre-dates a literary shift from more clearly identified "religious" narratives to "realistic" fiction -- and the contemporary scholarship of literature written after these perceived historical and cultural changes. Scholars of colonial Puritan literature in particular, for example, arguably seem more aware of the spiritual concerns of Puritan writers than do scholars of nineteenth-century writers. For many contemporary readers, this distinction simply marks the difference between what is often understood as a coherent religious community (e.g. Massachusetts Bay) -- in which religion, politics, and art seem intrinsically linked -- and the more diverse and complex community of the nineteenth-century U.S. -- in which politics and art seem more distinct from religion. But of course, as colonial American scholars acknowledge, Massachusetts Bay was hardly a coherent community; and, as Foster herself argues, religion and religious belief were not so separate from other nineteenth-century cultural concerns as contemporary readers would like to assume. (See a related discussion of Foster's argument in Chapter 4.)
reposition received narratives of nationhood and identity. Not surprisingly, perhaps, each
of these women exposes through her text(s) the limitations of a dominant or "official"
narrative of white, middle-class, male Protestantism. Still, as a careful examination of their
work reveals, each in turn engages and repositions the theological foundations of that
narrative, crafting new "temples of thought and action" (in Frances Harper's phrase) out of
the condemned structures of the past. It is, in fact, not enough for any of these women
merely to criticize -- or, conversely, merely to replicate -- "Christianity" in its traditional
forms. As I argue, each writer also presents a reenvisioned narrative of religious belief for
her nineteenth-century world. Read together, they raise intriguing questions about the role
of religion in transforming cultural ideas (and ideals), and in constructing an identifiably
"American" national identity.

Visions of Nation

At the heart of this discussion is the means by which individuals and communities
construct a sense of identity (be it social, political, cultural, or spiritual) and the extent to
which each defines the other. In recent studies of a uniquely American national narrative,
this interactive construction refers to the narrative construction of "American" culture and
identity, and the extent to which an individual's experience of self is either reinforced or
undermined by that construction. Within the more specific context of this study, it refers to
the ways in which national and personal identity in nineteenth-century America were
informed by Protestant Christianity in particular, and the extent to which individuals of
differing social and cultural groups both accommodated and transformed that received
narrative in their own written texts.
In *Fathering the Nation*, literary scholar Russ Castronovo broadly defines "national narrative" as "a consistent narrative line reflected in all the artifacts deployed by a culture" (e.g. its art, literature, architecture, oratory) and structured "to accommodate scattered people to homogeneous imaginings of themselves as a nation" (229n.9). In her related work, *Constituting Americans*, Priscilla Wald maintains that the "official stories" of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States in particular were important to the construction of a cohesive political and cultural "vision" of the Union, working as they did to transform plural ethnic and racial peoples into a collective "We the People" (2). Overall, both writers suggest, these articulations of cultural identity reflect an impulse to create a sense of unity, sameness, and order, even (or perhaps, necessarily) in the face of diversity and apparent difference. Indeed, writes Wald, these were the narratives through which a nation "spoke itself into existence" (2); and as such, adds Castronovo, they were long "assumed as a site of cohesion" (emphasis added 6).

Notably, both Castronovo and Wald identify the origins of such cultural narratives in what might be understood as predominantly secular terms. Wald, for example, maintains that the official stories most important to nation-building "surface in the rhetoric of nationalist movements" often shaped by politicians and journalists (2). Castronovo, similarly, recognizes an "originary political rhetoric" framed by the nation's founding "fathers" and disseminated through national myths, legends, tales, and monuments (7). And yet certainly, according to many American religious historians, this same impulse to create cultural uniformity and order was also evidenced in the efforts of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "mainline" Protestant churches "to shape the nation's ethos, mores,
manners, and often its laws" (Marty, Foreword, *Righteous Empire*). Indeed, writes Winthrop Hudson, "The successful outcome of the Revolutionary struggle in the face of what seemed insuperable odds" was interpreted by the nation's dominant Protestant churches as "a signal act of God's providence," thus heightening their cultural belief that "the American people had a special destiny under God" (65). This was their common theological legacy from colonial America, Hudson explains; and therefore, despite their apparent institutional differences, he maintains, the leading church groups came together "to embark upon a powerful counteroffensive to combat the forces of irreligion and to fashion a Protestant America" (60). The mainstream Protestant "actors" in America's past consciously "set out to attract the allegiance of all people, [and] to develop a spiritual kingdom," adds religious historian Martin Marty (Foreword, *Righteous Empire*). And, though he is careful to acknowledge that white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant denominations did not constitute the sole "Protestant experience" in nineteenth-century America, he nevertheless maintains that these groups were the dominant (indeed, "overpowering") force in the first century of United States history (i.e. 1776-1877). Within the context of his study, in fact, these were the "Builders of Empire," who "found no difficulty relating divine purpose to their mission of a national empire" (14), and who thus "made a liturgy out of their history" as a means of "legitimizing their ideas of their own superiority" (17).

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3 Though American Protestantism has been characterized from its beginning by multiple and varied denominational groups, several scholars identify as the core nineteenth-century Protestant Church body those denominations unified by a common inheritance from colonial America — specifically, the English-speaking evangelical denominations (primarily Presbyterians and Congregationalists, later Methodists and Baptists) who shared with early Puritan Protestantism the belief that the moral and civic order of American society depended upon "a unifying religious perspective and a broadly accepted morality" (Handy 3). See Handy ix; Hudson 60-61. Martin Marty also names Episcopalians as one of the three most predominant groups (*Righteous Empire* 6). For discussions of the specifically Puritan New England influences on national culture and American identity, see Bercovitch; Miller.
At once broad and far-reaching in concept, then, this consciously constructed vision or dominant narrative of the nineteenth-century American nation was nonetheless restricted largely to "those who shared a common understanding of the core of the Christian faith" (as Hudson describes the leading Protestant groups); and, at this "core" in particular was the conviction that the nation's "moral order would be secure and the moral good advanced only to the extent that the majority of the people could be persuaded to adopt the wholesome laws which God designed for the well-being of the community" (emphasis added, Hudson 66). More to the point, perhaps, the final, formal disestablishment of church from state in 1833 did not mean for these Protestant leaders the necessary loss of a shared belief system; to the contrary, the most effective means of "civilizing" America remained for them the thorough "Christianizing" of America. And, to clarify even further, writes Robert Handy, "An important part of their very broad conception of a Christian civilization was a stress upon the moral code of Protestantism" in particular (33). The ultimate goal, it would thus seem, was to maintain and extend a population homogeneous in character and belief; and indeed, writes Winthrop Hudson of the mid-to-late nineteenth century in particular, even in the face of increasing diversity "[t]he whole mood and spirit of the country ... seemed so indelibly Protestant that in the end, it was believed all minority groups would be either assimilated or 'Americanized'" (126).

By several accounts of America's religious history, the collective Protestant effort to fashion a Christian nation was a success, in theory if not always in practice. By the middle of the nineteenth century, maintains Winthrop Hudson, Protestantism had established "undisputed sway over almost all aspects of the national life," with an influence that extended far beyond actual church membership (129). Indeed, he argues, "among the
populace at large, the patterns of belief and conduct — both private and public, individual and corporate — were set by the churches" (110). In terms more specific to this study, in other words, mainstream Protestant leaders had essentially succeeded in establishing a viable and widespread cultural "narrative" of sorts, effectively penetrating American society by extensive and persuasive means (e.g. revivals, tracts, Sabbath schools, Bible societies, charitable organizations, and social reform groups) and thus extending the idea that a Protestant moral code went hand in hand with American civilization and citizenship. This was, to the "mainliners" (as Martin Marty labels them), the ideal model of an American democratic faith. And yet, as Robert Handy notes, "the leaders of the thrust to make America Christian usually failed to sense how coercive their efforts appeared to those who did not share their premises," often viewing any "opponents" as "agents of evil" based solely on the conviction that they themselves were "unequivocally on the side of good" (x). Similarly, Colleen McDannell maintains that the standards of Christianity promoted by the evangelical Protestant vision served as a way "to judge and control" members of a group (ranging, presumably, from the individual "citizen" to the republic as a whole); hence, "those who failed to uphold those standards were guilty on a religious level" (154). Thus, despite the apparent belief that "a nation could be both distinctively Christian and yet fully free religiously" (as Handy articulates it, 48), the limits of any true freedom (in terms of variance or diversity) were clear. If a mainstream, white, middle-class Protestantism "undergirded republican virtue" and was therefore "essential to properly functioning civil life" (to quote religious historian Henry Bowden, American Indians and Christian Missions 164), then diversity was, in and of itself, perceived as a dangerous
Re-Visions of Faith

Implicit within this "compulsion toward coherence and homogeneity" in the construction of a national (religious) narrative, then, is the question of what other stories (or, stories of "other") have been suppressed, forgotten, or even erased. As Priscilla Wald maintains, the role of a national narrative is to define and shape how individuals will experience themselves and understand themselves both as people and as part of "a people" collectively (4). For nineteenth-century African Americans, Native Americans, and women in particular, however, the "mainstream" Protestant vision of a Christian America failed to offer a full sense of equal "personhood" and communal participation. The resulting

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4 As Mark Hulsether notes, U.S. religious historians too reflect a tendency to take a generalized approach to American religion. "[A] common complaint for two decades," Hulsether writes in a 1995 article, is that "general historians of American religion" tend to "[overstress] top-down interpretations of mainline Protestants" (130). Included among the "general histories" that have received this complaint are Winthrop Hudson's *American Protestantism* and Martin Marty's *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*, both of which I rely on in my discussion here. The scholarly response has been studies that emphasize the pluralistic nature of American religion — such as Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, which I also include in this discussion. I find all of these studies relevant to my own in that each — despite differences in their critical emphasis — identifies "mainstream" religious institutions that comprise and shape a dominant cultural force in the nineteenth-century U.S., just as Lee, Davis, Phelps, and Harper do.

5 The quoted phrase here comes from Castronovo 6.

6 As religious historian Jon Butler notes of American Protestant congregations before 1860 especially, "Most denominations ... were simply not democratic by either contemporary or modern standards" (*Awash in a Sea of Faith* 272). In his discussion of the social and political elitism of "the mainstream institutions," Butler points to the neglect of blacks and women in particular (*Awash in a Sea of Faith* 279-80). Similarly, suggests historian Ronald Takaki, nineteenth-century national planners and church leaders alike perceived Native Americans as a pronounced impediment to the prevailing vision of a Christian America. "Indians as Indians could not be tolerated in the republican civilization the American Revolution had created," he writes (63). The solution was an Indian policy that linked "civilization" and "Christianization." Significantly, however, even as Christianized — and therefore presumably "Americanized" — peoples, Native Americans were perceived (alongside African Americans and women) as inferior to the cultural narrative of "personhood" constructed in predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class Protestant terms.
experience for many was one of "ill-fitting selfhood" (to borrow a phrase from Wald), an 
uneasy conflict between national and personal identities; and yet, for many, too, it was this 
very conflict out of which their own stories emerged. As suggested earlier, Faith Positions 
has its foundation at this point of incongruity between national narrative and personal 
experience, especially as each is expressed in religious terms. Notably, for example, each 
of the writers represented here creates a narrative of experience that at once engages the 
mainstream Protestant vision of a Christian America and, to varying extents, challenges, 
shapes, and revises that vision. More specifically, even as each writer recognizes and 
responds to a dominant narrative of white, middle-class, male Protestantism -- the same 
narrative that would exclude or, at best, complicate her equal participation in the Christian 
nation -- each in turn, through her own narrative, reveals the limitations of that dominant 
narrative and thus effectively transforms it.

Most importantly, perhaps, the manner in which these writers both experience and 
express "Christianity" (in its notably multiple forms) becomes an effective means of both 
participating in and contributing to the social, political, and spiritual constructions of 
American identity. And certainly, by reading these experiences and expressions both 
together and against each other, my ultimate aim is to broaden the received conceptions of 
this identity in both literary and religious terms. I believe, in fact, that a close study of the 
texts included here reveals a richer and more complicated cultural "story" of America.

Like these primary texts themselves, the story that I tell in Faith Positions has many 
layers. By focusing on African- and Anglo-American women writers, I am able to examine 
the nature of belief as a dynamic positioning force that intersects directly with the
positioning forces determined by gender and race. By organizing my study across a range of these "faith positions," I am able to work beyond the usual binaries -- assimilation vs. resistance, for instance -- to explore the varied and complex roles of religious belief in shaping personal, social, and even national identities. Accordingly, by examining specific texts and expressions of belief, I join a growing community of scholars who are trying to push beyond a broad, abstract idea of "religion" or "Christianity" to the particularized layers of individual religious experience.

This particularized story begins with the 1836 spiritual autobiography of Jarena Lee -- *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady*. As an early nineteenth-century narrative, this text provides a useful context for post-Revolutionary visions of a "Christian nation." The text itself, in fact, reflects a studied familiarity with the traditional patterns of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant conversion narratives (patterns that, in U.S. literary history, reach back to seventeenth-century Puritan New England); and yet, Lee complicates -- and thus revises -- these "standard" expressions of religious experience by encompassing concerns of race and gender as well. Indeed, though Lee, a black woman evangelist, writes as a Christian who has experienced personal conversion and a divine commission to minister (thus echoing the first-person accounts of "mainstream" Protestants), she is notably restricted -- even rejected -- by a series of church hierarchies structured in predominantly white, patriarchal, middle-class terms. In response, she writes to (re)claim her "spiritual birthright" (in William Andrews' phrase, *To Tell a Free Story* 7): i.e. to demonstrate that both African Americans and women were "as much chosen by God" as white men, and thus to reveal the significant limitations of the prevailing evangelical narrative.
Of course, as an African American, and as a woman, Lee was denied the authority to preach in either white or black churches. And, because of these conflicts of gender and race in particular, twenty-first century scholars tend to focus on Lee's social position alone. But I see her spiritual position as intrinsically tied to her identity as a whole. In the narrative that she writes, I argue, Lee draws on her belief in a divine calling as a means of challenging and revising the traditional church model. She does not claim in her narrative that religious belief allows her to transcend race or gender. As she understands it, in fact, she has been chosen not *despite* the fact that she is black and female, but *because of* this particular identity. And it is through this sense of divine empowerment that she eventually gained some social empowerment. She insisted on her right to preach by God's authority — not by any man-made church laws — and she eventually became the first itinerant woman preacher for the African Methodist Episcopal church, though she was never officially ordained as a minister.

Lee's text, then, provides a useful introduction to and lens through which to read the subsequent texts in this study: Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Silent Partner* (1871), and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted* (1892). Read together with Jarena Lee's spiritual autobiography, these three novels do the similar work of challenging the effectiveness of a predominantly white, middle-class, patriarchal model of Christianity in the face of gender, race, and class differences. Davis and Phelps, for example, write to expose and to challenge the assumptions of a traditional, institutional Protestantism that cannot effectively reach the white working-class poor, while Harper reveals the actual hypocrisy and prejudices of an
ideally democratic American Christianity. And in turn, each writer presents alternate models of what she sees as a true "Christianity of Christ" or true "Christian way" that is distinct from the institutionalized, hierarchical Christianity that she sees established in her nineteenth-century world.

Still, these three writers faced challenges that Lee did not. Writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they produced novels that reflect the gradual mid-century shift from religious texts rooted in more formal, orthodox colonial literary models to realistic fiction that could advance a simpler, more accessible "code of morality and pious feeling" (in David Reynolds' phrase). This shift in literary styles was in many ways a shift that complicated cultural understandings of what constitutes "realism," whereas the discourse of religious sentiment was to many in the nineteenth century the most realistic discourse. The challenge for Davis, Phelps, and Harper, then, was how to present a discourse of faith in a world that was increasingly finding its "realism" in the conventions and priorities of secular life. Ultimately, in presenting their own reenvisioned narratives of a true "Christianity of Christ" that pushes beyond the constructed boundaries of the "Christianity of this land" (to borrow Frederick Douglass' distinction), each of these women novelists arguably moves even further from the "mainstream" evangelical narrative than does Lee.

Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*, for example, is the first known piece of fiction in U.S. literature to expose the sub-human living and working conditions of men and women at the Pennsylvania Ironworks. At the time, these conditions were treated with contempt by most. However, in *Life in the Iron Mills*, Davis uses the setting of the ironworks to create a microcosm of the larger issues of social injustice and oppression. She employs the techniques of realism to draw attention to the harsh realities of life in the ironworks, demonstrating the effectiveness of literature in promoting social change.

7"At the same time that the novel was being attacked by conventional clergymen," writes Reynolds, "many writers believed, with Caroline W. Thayer, that 'the light, unthinking mind, that would revolt at a moral lesson from the pulpit, will seize, with avidity, the instruction offered under the similitude of a story.'" And, by 1871, Reynolds further notes, "Mark Twain could assert that the gospel of Christ comes 'filtered down' to nineteenth-century Americans ... 'through the despised novel and Christmas story ... and NOT from the drowsy pulpit!'" (Faith in Fiction 1). For more on the increasing popularity of mid-to-late nineteenth-century fiction designed to effect social change through an appeal to Christian conscience, see especially Baym, *Woman's Fiction* and "The Rise of the Woman Author"; Brodhead; Tompkins.
industrial workers -- here, specifically, in the iron mills of West Virginia. As I note in Chapter 2, this story came as both a "shock" and a "revelation" to the readers of the April 1861 Atlantic magazine in which it first appeared; and, since its rediscovery in 1972, the story has been upheld as a landmark of literary realism. In Life in the Iron Mills, Davis does indeed write to expose and to explore the very "real" complications of industrialization. And yet, for Davis, I argue, the more real concern was the question of how belief can function in an increasingly industrial world. In this text, she criticizes the traditional notion of "philanthropy" and she reveals the ways in which conventional practices of "Christian charity" fail to help the working-class poor in any real or lasting way. In turn, however, Davis does not draw on a generalized (or even sentimental) idea of religion to provide resolution, as some scholars have suggested. Rather, I argue, she uses her story to develop a particular understanding of the lack of and need for resolution, and thus to open a space for an operative faith -- even as the story itself struggles for the terms of how this faith would be manifest in the world as it is.

Like Life in the Iron Mills, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' 1871 novel The Silent Partner was one of the first novels to expose the living and working conditions for girls and women laboring in the Massachusetts textile mills. And, like Davis, Phelps explores in this novel the ways in which a changing industrial world complicates the roles of religious belief. In Chapter 3, then, I explore the question that appears to have frustrated contemporary scholars: specifically, what does it mean to see Phelps as a religious writer? Most scholars today are inclined to see Phelps' Gates books alone as "religious" texts, distinct from her "feminist" novels (among which The Silent Partner is considered one of
the most important). I argue, however, that in The Silent Partner Phelps is searching in clear and evocative ways for an application of biblical narrative to the needs of an industrialized world. In doing so, she begins to redefine notions of "philanthropy," "charity," "ministry," and "Christ's work"; and thus, in the end, she opens up for her readers plural manifestations of active belief in the world.

In the narrative line that I create in Faith Positions, Frances Harper's 1892 novel Iola Leroy is perhaps the climax. As a novel that covers a wide historical and cultural range -- from slavery, through Civil War, to Reconstruction -- Iola Leroy also presents a range of shifting religious beliefs, racial identities, and gender roles. At the time of its original publication, the novel was praised by William Still as "an interesting, moral story-book, full of practical lessons" appropriate for "colored Sunday-schools in the South" (3). And today, it is considered a "classic" of African American literature in its depiction of a main character, Iola Leroy, who "embodies race, gender, and class contradictions in American society" (Boyd, "Iola Leroy" 389). But, as I argue in Chapter 4, I see something even more complex at work in this novel in terms of religious belief. Specifically, I see Harper's novel as an act of faith within itself. Like the women who come before her in this study, Harper believed in the power of literature to effect social and spiritual change. In her novel, then, she criticizes the kind of Christianity that is used in defense of slavery and discrimination. But she does not reject all Christianity. Rather, through her novel she calls her readers "to do something of lasting service" for the sake of all; and, in fact, she answers this call herself by writing what she calls a "good, strong book" designed to "awaken" a whole nation to what she envisions as a more "Christlike humanity."

The story that I tell in Faith Positions is at once particularized and collective,
consciously fragmented and yet unified. Each woman comes from a different cultural position - and each is positioned differently within her culture - and yet each raises the similar question of how belief can work in the world as they experience and perceive of it. This may be demonstrated in the narrative line that reaches from Jarena Lee to Frances Harper. When I return to a conscious consideration of race in Iola Leroy, for example, I am turning to a narrative that is connected to Lee, but one that is fundamentally different from Lee as well. Like Lee, Harper works both in and through her novel to expose and to criticize the inequities inherent in "the Christianity of this land"; still, both she and her text have a different social-spiritual position from Lee. To say, for example, that Lee and Harper were both black women is to say very little, since the shaping forces of race and gender in post-Reconstruction American society had changed significantly from the early century. Similarly, to say that both were Christian says very little, since each woman's unique cultural position shapes her perspective on how faith functions in the culture as she knows it. Reading these particularized stories collectively, then, reminds us that "religion" is not just a generalized cultural context, but rather that religion is deeply contextualized within culture at each historical moment.

The challenge for each of the writers in this study was how to create a narrative of Christianity that operated within the fragments of culture in which they lived. But, in each woman's attempt to account for her own cultural position, and to create this individualized narrative of belief, she reminds us of the ongoing narrative of the "Christianity of this land." In my "Conclusion," then, I turn to Yankton Sioux writer Zitkala-Sa, and her 1901 short story "The Soft-Hearted Sioux." Read both with and against the texts in this study,
Zitkala-Sa's story presents a narrative perhaps most uncomfortably at odds with the dominant evangelical vision of a "Christian America." The central Indian character of this early twentieth-century text is an apparently willing convert to Christianity; and yet, for him, full "membership" in a Protestant church body seems possible only at the exclusion of Native American tradition and community. Throughout the story, then, he struggles with the seeming incompatibility of two distinct cultural identities.

This is the kind of story, I think, that exemplifies why so many scholars are uncomfortable with ideas of religion, and indeed why so many of them perceive religion as an oppressive force. And this story in fact complicates the other texts in this study, which is why I conclude with it. In particular, I do not want to suggest that the narrative I create in *Faith Positions* has an uncomplicated, happy ending. That is, I do not mean to suggest in my narrative of these women and their texts that religious belief -- in all of its plural forms -- leads only and inevitably to the redemptive view of what Frances Harper calls "a brighter coming day." Certainly, as with Lee and Harper especially, this can be true. But, as is evidenced in each of these texts, the whole story is much more complicated. In this concluding chapter, then, I explore more directly the contested cultural and theological terrain upon which all of these texts have been constructed. "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" is a staging of the confrontation between narrative positioning and cultural positions, a confrontation in which lies what might be termed a nationalist theology that each of these writers attempts to revise.

So, where does this leave us? The hopes that I have for this study are many, but related. Primarily, I hope that it will be a call to scholars of American literature to
acknowledge the presence of religious experience and expression in nineteenth-century literature in particular -- and to take this expressed belief seriously. Each of the writers and texts represented in *Faith Positions* insists upon the dynamic and complex nature of belief. To take their belief seriously, then, also includes the need to push beyond a broad, abstract idea of "religion" or "Christianity" to the particularized layers of individual religious experience. These five women writers alone (including Zitkala-Sa) demonstrate that the word "religion," and even "Christianity," cannot stand for any one, single position of faith.

In turn, I hope this study will demonstrate that if we avoid or neglect what was most important to these women -- if we disregard the religious belief that was just as central to their personal and cultural identities as gender or race -- then we are misreading the feminist history of women in the United States. And this actually brings me back to why I came to study these women in the first place. These writers and their texts give me models for facing the challenge of how to act with conviction and live with faith in a world that does not always acknowledge the value of these qualities. They remind me that we need to draw on the past for help in facing the challenges that we face today.
CHAPTER 1

READING PAST DESCRIPTION:
REPOSITIONING BELIEF IN JARENA LEE'S
LIFE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In the title of her 1836 autobiography, evangelist Jarena Lee identifies herself to her readers in distinct (and distinctly "different") terms: this is the story, the title announces, of *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady*. As Frances Foster reminds, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African American authors were "regularly identified by race," and women writers often identified by gender, in the titles of their texts (*Written by Herself* 65). Given this emphasis, then, it is perhaps fitting that modern readers of Lee's text most often focus on her identity -- and indeed, her distinction -- as a black woman. To date, in fact, Jarena Lee is celebrated by scholars as the first African American woman authorized to preach by the all-male hierarchy of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church, and the 1836 edition of *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* is recognized as the first black woman's autobiography in the United States.¹

As Phebe Davidson rightly notes, Lee's race and gender were "those two visible aspects of her identity that most inescapably defined her position" (emphasis added 136). And yet, what is equally notable in this particular focus is the neglect of the invisible aspects of Lee's identity -- specifically, the "religious experience" to which her title also draws the

¹ In addition to the 1836 edition of her autobiography, which is the primary focus of this essay, Lee published a second, expanded edition in 1849. On the distinctions between Lee's two texts, see Andrews, *Sisters* 23; Bassard 89-92; Houchins xli n.1; Peterson, "Doers" 85.
reader's attention, and which for Lee redefined her position as "a coloured lady." As recounted in her narrative, Lee's conversion and sanctification provided an intimate, palpable experience of God's presence through which Lee understood herself to be selected and purified by God; and this in turn became the source of her social empowerment. Despite public reaction, Lee believed herself to be divinely authorized to preach, and it is this belief that ultimately allowed her to challenge and revise her socially defined position as a nineteenth-century African American woman.

As an expression of belief in a divine force that made her claims to authority possible, Lee's autobiography provides a challenge to those who accept the idea of religion as a tool of oppression, but who have more difficulty accepting the idea of religion as a vehicle of liberation. Within the specific contexts of nineteenth-century American studies, Carolyn Haynes describes this as the "nettlesome challenge [of] how to address, explain, and analyze the prevalent and at times clearly willing use of Protestant rhetoric and ideology during the nineteenth century by the very people who may have been the most victimized by it" (xiii). Frederick Douglass was one among several nineteenth-century writers who reflected this particular "challenge" in their texts. As evidenced in his 1845 Narrative, for instance, Douglass recognized the victimization of individuals in the name of "religion," and he criticized this desecration in severe terms. "Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave trade go hand in hand together," he argues in the Appendix to his narrative; "We

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2 This neglect of Lee's spiritual belief is part of a larger neglect of Lee that literary scholars are only beginning to address. For scholarship on Lee, see especially Andrews, Sisters and Free Story 69-72, 140; Bassard 87-107; Braxton 49-59; Davidson; Ernest; Foster, "Adding Color," "Neither Auction Block nor Pedestal," and Written by Herself 56-75; Houchins; McKay; Peterson, "Doers" 56-57, 73-87 and "Secular and Sacred Space."
have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members" (153-54). These "horrible inconsistencies" filled Douglass with "unutterable loathing" for the "partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land," largely because of the transgressions that were committed by those who identified themselves as "Christians." Ultimately, such bold "fraud" (as he labels it) led Douglass to declare that "I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity" (153).

That Douglass should aim both to expose and to denounce the hypocrisy of "slaveholding Christianity" most likely comes as little surprise to contemporary readers. In the nineteenth-century alone, this particular criticism was a widely-used and powerful tool in the antislavery movement; and the principles behind it reverberated in other contested areas of American culture, including immigration and the women's rights movement. Still, what is remarkable in Douglass' appended text is the (re)definition of religion which he offers to nineteenth- and twenty-first-century readers alike. Concerned that his readers will mistake his critical treatment of "the religion of this land" for a criticism of all religion, that is, Douglass makes a sharp-edged distinction: "What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper," he clarifies; "for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference" (153). Here, Douglass dislodges the assumption that "religion" in general, or "Christianity" more specifically, can be defined in singular terms; and he puts in its place a more complex understanding of faith. He recognizes clearly that the "infernal business" of the slaveholder
is often "cover[ed] ... with the garb of Christianity"; in turn, however, he believes in a "Christianity proper" that is set apart from this outward show. Indeed, it is his belief in a "pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ," Douglass explains, that allows him "to reject [the Christianity of this land] as bad, corrupt, and wicked" (153).

Douglass' caution against a generalized (mis)understanding of "religion," as well as his recognition of the multiple and distinct forms of "Christianity" in particular, are important cues for American literary scholars to follow. Indeed, while contemporary American literary scholarship is "rich in studies that foreground gender, race, and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity and class," writes Jenny Franchot, scholars "persist in evading the larger culture's religious concerns" ("Invisible Domain" 834). And, while the "scholarly treatment" of cultural categories such as gender and race has been "quite variegated, complex, and carefully contextualized," adds Carolyn Haynes, "the academic consideration of Protestantism and its relationship to nondominant peoples has been remarkably uniform" (xiv). In fact, Haynes argues, the predominant trend in contemporary Americanist treatments of religion has been "either to view Protestantism as a purely debilitating or a merely utilitarian force, or, to ignore its presence and effects altogether" (xv). At the heart of this "studied neglect" of religion (as Franchot labels it, "Invisible Domain" 841) seems to be a range of assumptions, from a general notion that "belief is static" (Franchot, "Invisible Domain" 835), to the more specific idea that religious belief and the "advancement" of nonwhite peoples and white women in particular are "mutually exclusive" (Haynes xiv). And yet, as Douglass' text suggests, what such an approach neglects is the complexity of "religion" in general and of individual religious belief more
Jarena Lee's spiritual autobiography is important for the guidance that it provides to scholars along these lines. Specifically, Lee's text offers scholars an opportunity to explore the complexity of religious experience and expression, and the ways in which these both shape and are shaped by experiences defined by race and gender. As Lee's narrative models, this shaping takes place even at the most fundamental levels of textual production and reception. Indeed, Lee relies upon her early nineteenth-century readers to recognize the traditional patterns of her conversion experience and to respond with familiarity to her expressions of faith. Still, Lee does not simply follow these patterns. Rather, she interrogates them through the lens of her particular experience, thus exposing the apparent contradictions between experiences of belief and exclusion, of spiritual empowerment and institutional restriction. Despite the proliferation of evangelical denominations throughout the United States in the 1830s and 40s, and the formal disestablishment of church from state that seemed to ensure that no one church would be dominant, Lee reveals the ways in which she was confined by a church hierarchy still structured in predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class terms. Written from within this confinement, not simply past it, Lee's autobiography emphasizes the multiple ways in which belief both shapes and alters the structures that define personal and social identities. In other words, Lee does not transcend race or gender by way of an abstract religious belief. Rather, her experience of belief is grounded in the particular cultural geography that defined her identity. By her own description, she is at once "[God's] poor coloured female instrument" (37); the various realms of her identity converge in the realm of belief. Finally, then, through this
intersection of cultural and religious experience -- building from Lee's individual faith position to a wide range of possible faith positions -- Lee's particular expression of faith becomes something of an entrance for scholars to a more complex and variegated understanding of American religious life.

Cultural Constructions and Limitations: Race and Gender in the Church Body

The complex interplay among the various cultural categories of identity that shaped Lee's experience -- her race, her gender, her religious beliefs, and the institutional setting for her calling as a minister -- makes of her narrative an important case study in American literary history. American literary scholars cannot help but note the presence of religious experience and expression in nineteenth-century literature in particular. Few scholars have done the work of focusing on this presence; still, even a cursory survey of the nineteenth-century literary landscape reveals its various forms and manifestations.3 Indeed, from Nathaniel Hawthorne's fixation on New England's Puritan past, to Harriet Beecher Stowe's attribution of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to divine authorship, to Walt Whitman's assertion that the "one deep purpose" in his writing of *Leaves of Grass* was "the Religious purpose,"4 nineteenth-century American literary culture reflects a broad range of engagements with ideas of religion and belief. And, as William James suggests in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), no singular concept of "religion" or of "Christianity" can adequately (or accurately) encompass this range. Indeed, just as with a

3 A few important studies that foreground religion in American literary history include Franchot, *Roads to Rome*; Haynes; Matthews; Morey; Moses; Peterson, *Doers*; Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction*; T. Smith.

complex concept like "government," James argues, "the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence" (31). At the same time, however, critical avoidance or scholarly neglect of such a wide-ranging religious presence would be equally inadequate and inaccurate. Each of the writers noted above occupies what I term a unique faith position -- a particular configuration of religious experience and belief as shaped by his/her particular cultural position -- and it is through this position that the role of belief in each of their texts should be addressed. More often than not, however, belief is relegated to the broad category of religion; and even in the study of a spiritual autobiography like Jarena Lee's, belief tends to be subordinated to the other categories of analysis (particularly race, gender, and class) with which contemporary readers have become more comfortable.

A reading that privileges race and gender in Lee's text over religious belief is arguably a misreading, for in the story that Lee tells about herself, belief is the central story. Indeed, while modern scholars are often inclined to focus first on the distinctions of Lee's social position, Lee herself focuses primarily on her religious journey from a "servant maid" "wholly ignorant of the knowledge of God" to a chosen "handmaiden" of the Lord (27, 46). By her own description, for instance, Lee's early years as a servant girl were remarkable not for any physical or material condition, but rather for the awakening of her consciousness as "a wretched sinner" and her eventual conversion in 1804 (when she was 21). Indeed, after her exposure to various religious groups and denominations, Lee ultimately joined Philadelphia's Bethel Church (the cornerstone of the A.M.E. church), and within three

5 There are notable exceptions to this inclination. Andrews, Foster, and Peterson especially provide excellent commentary on the role of Lee's personal belief in relationship to social and church institutions. Still, scholarship needs to go beyond the treatment of religion as mere background or context for other cultural issues.
weeks her soul was "gloriously converted to God" under the preaching of the church's founder, Richard Allen (29). Four years later, she experienced what was known among traditional Methodists as sanctification -- a "second blessing" of the Holy Spirit through which it was believed that "holiness" (i.e. sinlessness) could be attained -- and four years later still, she believed herself called to "preach the gospel" (36). Initially, Allen denied Lee permission to preach among the African Methodists on the grounds that "[the Discipline] did not call for women preachers" (36). Still, Lee persisted. And by 1818, following an "impulsive" moment at Bethel Church during which Lee describes herself as "aided from above to give an exhortation" (44), Allen finally endorsed her call to preach. Though she was never officially licensed or ordained by the A.M.E. church, Lee followed her calling for many years, travelling widely and preaching to people "of various denominations," "both coloured and white" (47).

Importantly, Lee journeyed and wrote from within the acknowledged confines of the A.M.E. church, not from outside them. Lee's prime struggle, that is, was not that of a black woman within the kind of "partial," "hypocritical," and uniformly oppressive Christian church about which Frederick Douglass later complained. Rather, her challenge came from a church created in direct response to the "corrupt" and "wicked" "Christianity of this land." Indeed, the clear discrepancy that Lee came to signal between personal belief and church "by-laws," between divine authorization and institutional restriction, is a discrepancy that Richard Allen and the A.M.E. church hierarchy would have understood.

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6 Ahlstrom 326. On the debate over sanctification within African Methodism, see Campbell 45-50.
7 Lee's activities after 1849 -- the year in which her second, expanded autobiography was published -- are unknown. On the distinction between exhorting and preaching, see Andrews, *Sisters* 239 n.11.
firsthand. As a slave who had been converted to Methodism in his adolescence, and who later as a free man established himself as "one of the [Methodist] movement's most effective evangelists," for example, Richard Allen was dedicated to the Methodist discipline (Campbell 7). At the same time, however, he encountered repeatedly the racism of white church leaders. Thus, when Allen founded Philadelphia's Bethel Church in 1794, and later incorporated the A.M.E. church in 1816, he sought to provide black Methodists with a careful balance: the simplicity and discipline of the Methodist doctrine that he himself valued, but in a church of their own that would engender "a desperately needed sense of community and belonging" (Campbell 11). More to the point, perhaps, what Allen sought was an alternative by which he and other black Methodists could participate fully in their faith without the limitations wrought by racial prejudice. Indeed, as Campbell describes it, Allen and his A.M.E. co-founders "portrayed themselves not as schismatics but as keepers of the true faith, struggling to stem Methodism's declension" and (in Allen's words) to return to "the good old way" and "the simplicity of the Gospel" (13).

It was this same "simplicity of the Gospel" that forced Lee to assume authority over the cultural complexities of race and gender. Indeed, as her narrative suggests, Lee

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8 At the time of Allen's own membership in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for instance, the white Methodist Episcopal Church had "found it politic" to ignore the church's original ban against the membership of slaveholders (Campbell 13). In turn, black congregants like Allen were segregated to the back of the church and church gallery during services. And, in an instance that resonates subtly with Lee's later situation, even when Allen was eventually ordained a Methodist deacon in 1799 -- "an unprecedented promotion for a man of color," as church historian James T. Campbell notes -- the position came "without full sacerdotal powers" (11). For more on the segregation practices of white churches in the antebellum North, see Allen 25; George 53-55; Gravely 302-03; Litwack 196-99; Reimers 10-17; Wesley 50-53. On nineteenth-century church discrimination against the advancement of black men, see Campbell 11; Frey and Wood 166-67; Litwack 199-204; Wesley 126.

9 Campbell quotes Allen 30. On the independent church movement among nineteenth-century African Americans, see George; Gravely; Litwack 187-196; Nash 190-202; Raboteau 79-102; Wilmore 99-124.
similarly sought the practice of a "true," purified faith within a racially unified community. After three full months in a white Methodist congregation, for instance, Lee writes that "it appeared that there was a wall between me and a communion with that people, which was higher than I could possibly see over, and seemed to make this impression upon my mind, this is not the people for you" (28). And yet, within a single afternoon spent in Allen's church, she declares, "I had come to the conclusion, that this is the people to which my heart unites" (29). Given Allen's own struggles against what he called the 'spiritual despotism' of white Methodism, it would seem that he would be particularly sensitive to Lee's desire to enjoy full participation in the church (Allen 35). Still, in the A.M.E. founders' initial adoption of Methodist doctrine "virtually intact," they adopted a discipline, as Lee again quotes Allen, that "did not call for women preachers" (36). As historian Carol George maintains, "It apparently made little difference to these founding fathers that the Discipline they adopted was the same one used by the white Methodists; they were confident that in their hands it would be interpreted to meet the needs of black people" (87). And certainly, according to the accounts of several historians, the A.M.E. church did emerge as an increasingly significant "source of identity and racial expression" for free black Christians in the nineteenth century. But of course, the paradox revealed by Lee's experience is that even as black men like Richard Allen and his contemporaries succeeded in establishing their own religious authority in the face of racial discrimination, the leadership structure of their "new" church continued to be shaped by "the fact of

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10 This phrase is used by both George (87) and Campbell (13). See both for details on the changes that the A.M.E. founders did make to the original doctrine.

11 George 123. For more history on the A.M.E. church, see Campbell; Frey and Wood; Horton and Horton 137-42; Lincoln and Mamiya 47-75; Payne, *History*; Wesley.
fundamental domination: of blacks by whites, of women by men" (Frey and Wood 169).

Because Lee's religious experience encompassed her racialized and gendered identities, rather than countering them, it was her belief that became the driving force in her relation both to her church and to the world beyond it. More specifically, it was Lee's belief in her role as "[God's] poor coloured female instrument" that propelled her into territories largely uncharted by black women before her. This is not to say, of course, that Lee was uniquely singular in either her call or response. The work of modern historians and literary scholars has identified several nineteenth-century black women preachers and charismatic religious leaders: the former slave Elizabeth, whom some consider the earliest black woman preacher; Zilpha Elaw and Juliann Tilman, both of whom Lee mentions in her Journal (88, 93); Rebecca Cox Jackson, Sojourner Truth, and Maria Stewart, also contemporaries of Lee; Julia Foote and Amanda Berry Smith, who preached in the later century. Historical evidence, if fragmentary, also suggests that there may have been many more black women preachers, though their names are often lost to historical record (Brekus 134). Still, as historian Catherine Brekus clarifies, each of these women often thought of herself as "a solitary wanderer," an "exile" or "stranger" in "a strange land" (emphasis added 4-5). "Cut off from their collective past," she writes of both black and white female

\[\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\text{Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood maintain that the leadership structure of all evangelical churches — "whether black, white, or biracial" — was shaped by this established cultural hierarchy. Within the A.M.E. church, they therefore argue, "The gradual institutionalization of an indigenous black male leadership beginning late in the eighteenth century coincided with the categorical denial of ministerial privileges to black women." "The ministry of black women on a charismatic basis was accepted," they clarify, "but all claims to female religious authority were vehemently denied on biblical and doctrinal grounds" (169).}

\[\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\text{For an historical overview of women preaching in America, see Brekus; Collier-Thomas, Daughters of Thunder.}

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preachers, "women struggled to defend their right to preach without ever realizing that others had fought the same battles before them" (15).14

Even if Lee knew other "sister speakers" in the course of her travels, then, the lack of formal organization and public power among them forced her to chart her own individual (if familiar) course. For Lee, as for many others, this meant occupying a marginal position "not purely 'outside of'" but also not wholly "'a part of'" the male-dominated institutions of her day -- a position directly informed by Lee's gender and race, but one that "paradoxically allowed empowerment" (Peterson, *Doers* 18-19). As the expanded 1849 version of Lee's text emphasizes, for example, Lee operated within the A.M.E. church, but on the road; concordantly, she worked within the cultural spheres that defined her by race and by gender, but her experience of belief continually redefined those spheres. This dynamic, even mobile quality of belief is evidenced most obviously in the material added to the original 1836 text. Lee emphasizes in this new material the boundless (and boundary-less) nature of God's influence and power, as exhibited in the sheer variety and reach of her own ministry: from the sites of her preaching (meeting houses, court houses, school houses, camp meetings, private homes, and barns), the distances travelled (up to 21 miles walked in one day, and up to 721 miles travelled in one year, as close as Pennsylvania and New York, and as far as Ohio and Canada), and the people drawn to hear her speak (black and white, women and men, poor and rich, slaves and slaveholders, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers), to the forms which Lee's work took (preaching and

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14Many of these women found it necessary to account for their position as women in the black community, as well as for their position as black women in the larger community. See, for example, Elaw 83-93, 124, 136; Stewart 3-22.
exhorting; leading classes and holding prayer meetings; visiting the sick and the imprisoned; and conducting death-bed vigils and funeral sermons), and the physical manifestations of God's presence among those she served (trembling, weeping, shouting, and rejoicing). At the same time, and in striking contrast, Lee also presents the hardships and obstacles of her ministry, from "having to travel among strangers, and being poor and destitute," her health "much destroyed by speaking so often" (Journal 61, 58), to the more "severe trial" of persistent opposition against "the propriety of female preaching" (Journal 32). By working these elements both together and against each other, Lee carries forward a conviction introduced in her earlier text: that "[t]here is nothing too hard for the Lord to do," even "[making] a way where there was no way to be seen" (Journal 24, 44). And it is this conviction, in turn, that informs her purpose in writing. As both the 1836 Life and Religious Experience and the 1849 Religious Experience and Journal emphasize, Lee offered her written accounts not only as a record of her own personal call and response, but as a means of actively ministering to a larger congregation of readers. Indeed, with ministering pen in hand, she implores her "dear" reader, "Though I may never see you in the flesh, I leave on this page my solemn entreaty that you delay not to obtain the pardoning favor of God" (31).

Superceding Culture: Redefining Identity through Embodied Belief

To a significant degree, Lee's readers meet her "in the flesh" before they meet her "on this page." She is a widely ministering "coloured lady" whose written life is an extension of her active faith, a kind of "offering ... to the world" as she describes it (Journal 77). In
turn, as Carla Peterson argues, Lee "envisioned literary self-representation -- writing and publication -- as tools of legitimation that would permit her to ... gain acceptance into the all-male hierarchy of the A.M.E. Church" ("Doers" 78). The challenge for Lee, then, was to access a mode of representation that would allow her to express the inexpressible, to describe what cannot be known fully outside of individual spiritual experience. Lee herself signals this dilemma in the ecstatic moment of her sanctification -- a moment, she writes, in which a "rush of ... ecstasy came upon me, and caused me to feel as if I were in an ocean of light and bliss" (34). In representing such an experience, Lee clearly acknowledges the limitations of both spoken and written words. "So great was the joy," she explains, "that it is past description. There is no language that can describe it, except that which was heard by St. Paul, when he was caught up to the third heaven [i.e. in ecstasy], and heard words which it was not lawful to utter" (emphasis added 34).15 And yet, even as she recognizes the inherent mystery of her personal experience, she recognizes in turn the necessity of making that experience comprehensible to her readers in order to "legitimate" it. The result

15Lee's allusion to St. Paul points to the idea of a kind of "privileged" knowledge revealed by God in a moment of ecstasy which it is not possible or permissible for a human being to disclose. In the New Testament passage that Lee cites (2 Corinthians 12: 2-4), Paul relates an experience of "visions and revelations of the Lord":

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

While this passage implies a second man, Lee follows the tradition of recognizing that man as St. Paul himself, and of understanding Paul's indirect reference to himself as a means of emphasizing his passivity -- and corresponding receptivity -- in being "caught up" in ecstasy. The suggestion here is of an altered state of consciousness in which Paul is delivered to the sacred dwelling of God (the "third heaven" or "paradise" in ancient cosmology) where divine secrets are revealed to him that cannot be "uttered." Lee aligns this with her own ecstatic experience in which the knowledge of sanctification is revealed to her, but is inexpressible in human terms. (This and subsequent biblical references are to the King James [Authorized] Version.)
is Lee's accommodation of the standard conventions of spiritual autobiography with which her early nineteenth-century readership would have been familiar: e.g. the studied progression from a state of "ignorance" and sinfulness to a state of "knowledge" and sanctification, the patterned placement of Biblical text and allusion, the quiet insistence on human frailty in the face of divine power. Still, in Lee's hands, and through her own experience as a black woman divinely sanctioned to preach, these traditional forms of expression take on an altered shape. Through the confluence of Lee's particular faith experience and her prescribed social position, that is, these conventions are necessarily expanded and transformed, allowing Lee to negotiate a position of social-spiritual worth that is otherwise denied to her by larger institutional and cultural constraints.

For Lee, one of the most powerful and yet simultaneously accessible means of articulating her experience is through what she calls "visible sign[s] of the manifestations of the Spirit of God" (Journal 78). In the same moment of sanctification for which there is "no language," for example, Lee is able to identify the physical manifestations of the Spirit's presence. "That very instant, as if lightening had darted through me," she writes, "I sprang to my feet and cried, 'The Lord has sanctified my soul!'" Minutes later, she continues, "I stood perfectly still, the tears rolling in a flood from my eyes" (emphasis added 34). On personal grounds, this embodiment of spirit becomes for Lee a means of "knowing" (through the body) what is "unknowable" (in spiritual terms); indeed, it is the outward evidence of sorts through which she becomes convinced of her own inward

16 Several scholars have noted that Lee's text is written in the tradition of spiritual autobiography. See Braxton 54; Davidson 136; Foster, Written by Herself 59-63; Peterson, "Doers" 78-79.

17 I draw here from Taves' title phrase: "Knowing through the Body."
experience. In turn, these "visible," physical manifestations of her divine inspiration make it possible for Lee to describe for her readers what is otherwise "past description," and thus to render her experience both meaningful and authentic. More importantly, perhaps, such direct, perceivable forms of inspiration become the means by and through which Lee (re)defines and literally (re)envisions her individual relationship with God, which in turn impacts the way she identifies herself both personally and socially. From spiritual ills manifested in an ailing, listless body, to out-of-body (or visionary) encounters with the divine that mirror sexual attraction and tension, to the involuntary leap and shout that follow the sudden infusion of God's Spirit, Lee's autobiography is remarkable for its emphasis upon the seemingly tangible, intimate, even sensuous nature of Lee's religious experience; and this striking suggestion of a profound, privileged connection with the divine necessarily reshapes Lee's relationship to human society.

As Sue Houchins notes, "the path toward mystical union" that nineteenth-century sanctified black women traveled (notably like the early mystics before them) often included a moment of divine enlightenment, in which God "sometimes bestows a gift of deeply erotic visions, which symbolize the depth of their shared mystical love, and promises her eternal salvation" (xxxiv). For Jarena Lee, the moment of such divine beneficence comes at a time of spiritual restlessness following her initial awakening to a state of sinfulness. Having been reduced physically by the fear of judgement, Lee anxiously searches for one who can "instruct [her] in the way of life and salvation" (28); and, after a series of failed connections (with the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches), she finds her religious community among the African Episcopal Methodists. Even here, however, the "one" who
is revealed to her as spiritual guide is not a human preacher, priest or minister, but God Himself, who exposes Lee to the malice in her heart and inspires forgiveness in its place. Indeed, in a vision charged with the energy of an intimate exchange, Lee recognizes "in the center of [her] heart one sin"; and, in the instant that she is able to reciprocate the divine love and charity so readily bestowed upon her -- declaring, "Lord I forgive every creature" -- her whole person appears to her "stripped" of its contaminating sin and exposed in all its vulnerable nakedness. Specifically, Lee recounts, "In that instant, it appeared to me, as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person, even to my fingers ends, split at the crown of my head, and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow, from my sight -- when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead" (29). In removing the outer shell, God uncovers the inner soul that is Lee's pure self; and, in turn, God "covers" this most innocent, unresistant Lee with a new garment made of divine "glory." Essentially, God and woman become one in this uniquely unguarded moment; and, it is in this sense that Lee's "true, pristine identity" is recovered in Christ (to paraphrase William Andrews, Sisters 15).

In a broader historical and literary context, certainly, such an embodied relation to God was not uncommon. According to traditional Methodist doctrine, in fact, such "perceptible inspiration" was believed to be a necessary component to the processes of conversion and sanctification. As Ann Taves maintains in looking at the history of Christianity, for instance, "it is clear that many Christians have had more or less spontaneous dissociative experiences" -- i.e. experiences often termed as "ecstasy," "inspiration," even "spirit possession" which suggest "altered states of consciousness" (202). And in the Methodist
tradition in particular, Taves notes, the physical manifestations of such experiences -- e.g. "sinking down," "crying out" -- became characteristic of the doctrine itself. Reaching back to early American Puritan literature, Walter Hughes too draws attention to the links between the spiritual life and the physical. With the religious emphasis at the time on the salvation of the individual, he writes, "Protestants, particularly those with Puritan tendencies, came to see their personal relation to God as the most important, as well as the most intimate, aspect of life. God began to appear more like a lover than a father" (102).

No doubt for Lee, then, her own experience along these lines, and its subsequent representation, marked a shared ground on which to engage her readers.

But for a black woman like Lee to detail her own relationship with God in these same terms, and to advance this as evidence of her authorization to preach publicly, was a significant challenge to and revision of early nineteenth-century assumptions about both African Americans and women. Indeed, though Lee was repeatedly confronted by the prejudice of white congregants like the old deist slaveholder who "did not believe the coloured people had any souls" (46), she relies upon and demonstrates a capacity to recognize, understand, and even sway her antagonists by virtue of the very "operation of the Spirit" that they question in her. And, though the black male elite of the North (including Richard Allen) "aspired ... to incorporate the dominant culture's ideology of true womanhood into its social code and thereby privatize its women" (as Carla Peterson suggests, "Doers" 9), Lee both speaks and writes with the conviction that she is an "instrument" of God, the embodiment of divine Word and action in the wider social-

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18 On John Wesley's argument for "the necessity" of what he called "perceptible inspiration" in Methodism, see Taves 206. See also Garrett 74-104.
spiritual sphere. At the same time, Lee's claims to direct knowledge of the divine challenged increasingly "mainstream" opinions about authentic forms of spiritual experience and expression. As Ann Taves maintains, in fact, there was a tendency among "post-Enlightenment" church leaders and other "educated elites" to disparage dissociative religious experience, based on the "traditionally held" assumption that "true religion is spiritual and rational as opposed to sensual and material" (220-21). Thus, she reminds, even though "perceptible inspiration" was a prominent component in early British Methodist conversion experiences and later in interracial American Methodist revivals, those who defended and professed this kind of "experiential religion" still had to struggle for "cultural legitimacy" (220). In the cultural climate within which Jarena Lee lived and wrote, this was especially true. Indeed, though A.M.E. bishop Richard Allen eventually endorsed Lee's call to preach, Lee met with fierce opposition from other church leaders and clergymen on her itinerant preaching circuit; and, after Allen's death in 1831, she found herself "measurably debarred from my own Church as regards this privilege I had been so much used to" (Journal 77). As several scholars suggest, this response was in large part due to an increasingly orthodox Protestant emphasis on "rational," "civilized" expressions of faith. To the "Western-educated" A.M.E. bishop Daniel Payne (who eventually succeeded Allen), for example, Taves writes that dissociative forms of Christianity were considered "ridiculous," "heathenish," and "irrational" (218). Carla Peterson, too, notes

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19 On the Cult of True Womanhood, see Welter. On black women and this ideal, see Foster, "Adding Color" 34-37; Yee 40-59. For more on the spiritual and visionary experiences of other black women preachers in the nineteenth century, see Humez.
that Payne was "a strong advocate for an educated ministry" and therefore "opposed to any displays of religious fervor" at church meetings. "Given such an attitude," Peterson continues, "Payne could only have opposed those uneducated women preachers like Lee whose only authority to preach was direct inspiration from God" ("Doers" 75).

At the heart of this opposition, suggests James Campbell, was a perceived threat to "authority and 'good order'" both within the church and beyond it. "When the dictates of the Spirit were at stake," Campbell notes, women like Lee seemed "utterly unamenable to discipline, whether in the shape of popular opinion, ministerial edict, or [in Lee's words] the 'by-laws of church government'" (47). And in turn, Campbell indicates, such apparent "indifference" to social and ecclesiastical "decorum" was regarded by the A.M.E. hierarchy as a hazard to the church's broader political project of racial "elevation" and "progress."

"Even as they turned away from a hostile and hypocritical white world," he writes, "[A.M.E.] church leaders were forever glancing back over their shoulders, knowing all too well that the 'enemies of the race' were watching, eager for any sign of deviation or declension" (50). This is not to say, certainly, that the all-male A.M.E. leadership was uniformly opposed to expressions of religious enthusiasm, but rather that they faced increasingly a dual sense of duty -- to unhindered worship within individual congregations, but also to the establishment of a unified religious denomination with a coherent (and consistent) philosophy. Given these particular concerns, it is perhaps not difficult to imagine a felt need among the A.M.E. leaders to regulate (even to restrict) certain forms of religious expression; nor is it difficult to recognize the challenge that Lee's claims of direct inspiration and divine agency posed to the accepted codes of order and propriety upon

20On what Payne called "extravagances of worship," see his Recollections 253-57.
which such a need was based.\textsuperscript{21}

As evidenced in both versions of her narrative, Lee herself was fully aware of the "enemies" and opposers who kept a watchful eye on her -- from her initial petition to preach, through the subsequent years of her ministry, and even to her autobiographical account. At the moment when Allen first denied her divine authorization to preach, for example, Lee reports that the "holy energy which burned within me, as a fire, began to be smothered"; and in this same instant, narratively, she steps forward to address her reader directly. "O how careful we ought to be," she cautions, "lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life" (36). Notably, the first of these responses is almost purely spiritual (and visceral) in nature, while the second is a consciously political (and reasoned) translation of the first; but in both, Lee carefully counters the church leaders' fears by emphasizing the equally hazardous (in fact, "smothering") impact of a church body that relies too heavily on "rational" ideas of religious experience and expression. In further support of her point, Lee turns to the earliest Christian "preachers": Mary Magdalene, who "first preach[ed] the risen Savior,"\textsuperscript{22} and the original disciples, who "though they were fishermen, and ignorant of

\textsuperscript{21}The politics of establishing the A.M.E. church involved social class as well as race and gender. As various religious organizations grew "from small, marginal sects into thriving middle-class denominations" in the early nineteenth century, explains Brekus, their official church histories marginalized the social classes generally and the women specifically who had been central to the groups' beginnings (8). See Brekus 7-8, 267-306.

\textsuperscript{22}Lee refers to Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ outside the tomb in which he had been buried -- an encounter during which she is given a message to deliver to the disciples. According to the New Testament account:

\begin{quote}
Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her." (John 20:17-18).
\end{quote}
letters too, were inspired [to preach]" (37). To this woman and these men of "primitive
times," Lee suggests, "it may be that the term preach ... did not mean exactly what it is
now made to mean; perhaps it was a great deal more simple then" (36). In this instance,
again, Lee clearly identifies and challenges the A.M.E. church hierarchy's insistence on an
"educated" ministry over an inspired (and embodied) knowledge of the divine. And
indeed, through these biblical models, Lee calls into question her readers' own
assumptions about what it means to be called to preach. "If then, to preach the gospel, by
the gift of heaven, comes by inspiration solely, is God straitened; must he take the man
exclusively?" she asks in a final challenge. "May he not, did he not, and can he not inspire
a female to preach the simple story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord,
and accompany it too, with power to the sinner's heart [?]" (37).

It is in fact Lee's belief in a divine force capable of superceding cultural forces that
makes it possible for her to work both within and against limiting social dictates. Through
the different levels of her spiritual experience, as suggested earlier, Lee gives voice to a
kind of knowledge beyond language; and it is this knowledge that helps to inform, even to
revise, Lee's understanding of her cultural position. Convinced of her personal and
spiritual worth through an increasing consciousness of God's watchfulness and guidance,
for instance, Lee is empowered in a way that helps her to retain the spiritual fervor that is
threatened by institutional limitations. In a moment of marked "affliction" following
Allen's dismissal of her initial appeal to preach, Lee writes, "the spirit strongly impressed it
on my mind to ... carry my case once more to the Lord." Both despite and as a result of

Based on this account, Lee argues that it was a woman who first preached the gospel, "for she [Mary]
preached the resurrection of the crucified Son of God" (36).
her dejection, she suggests, she receives the gift of another vision:

[T]he Lord enabled me to draw nigh to him, and to his mercy seat, at this time, in an extraordinary manner; for while I wrestled with him for the victory over this disposition to doubt whether I should persevere, there appeared a form of fire, about the size of a man's hand, as I was on my knees; at the same moment, there appeared to the eye of faith a man robed in a white garment, from the shoulders down to the feet; from him a voice proceeded, saying: "Thou shalt never return from the cross." Since that time I have never doubted... (37-38)

Significantly, here, Lee again signals an "extraordinary," privileged connection with the divine that recovers for her the "fire" that was "smothered" by the dictates of church government. In turn, she emphasizes that it is by the "eye of faith" (not the blinding "by-laws" of the church) that personal salvation is known.23 Finally, she rests in the conviction that no worldly obstacle can keep her from God's intentions for her. Citing the New Testament Epistle to the Romans, she concludes, "Now I could adopt the very language of St. Paul, and say that nothing could have separated my soul from the love of god, which is in Christ Jesus" (37).24

23Lee echoes both here and in her later reference to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans the doctrine of "justification by faith," in which Paul maintains that "justification" (and eventual salvation) has already taken place through the death and resurrection of Christ -- i.e. by "the cross." By contrast, Paul argues, "the law," with its emphasis on human efforts and abilities, cannot justify; rather, it blinds individuals to the grace and power of God. At the heart of this doctrine, as reflected in Lee's vision, is the belief that the power of the cross outweighs human power.

24In Romans 8: 38-39, Paul writes: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."
Receptivity and Revision: The Dynamics of Faith

Importantly, Lee's adoption of St. Paul's language does not transport her above and beyond the cultural realities determined by race, gender, and class; but neither does it function merely as a coping mechanism within a fixed, unalterable cultural position. Rather, it reveals her belief in a divine force capable of transforming received cultural assumptions and of revising individuals' ways of knowing and reading both themselves and the society they inhabit. Indeed, as the details of her own experience suggest, Lee comes to a new understanding of her personal and social worth only through the assurance of her spiritual worth; in other words, it is her lived, embodied experience of divine spirit that allows her to redefine her personal and social identities. In this respect, Lee both perceives and represents belief not as a static, immutable position, but as a dynamic, elastic positioning process of sorts. And in so doing, she invites (even challenges) her readers to understand belief in similar terms. In giving her readers guidance in how to "account for" the "uncommon impressions, which [they] cannot but have noticed, and possibly sneered at" in the course of reading her autobiography, for example, Lee offers an analogy that resists a simple, reductive explanation, but instead concedes the mystery inherent in actual life experience. As she writes:

It is known that the blind have the sense of hearing in a manner much more acute than those who can see: also their sense of feeling is exceedingly fine, and is found to detect any roughness on the smoothest surface, where those who can see find none. So it may be with such as [I] am, who has never had more than three months schooling; and wishing to know much of the way and law of God, have
therefore watched the more closely the operations of the Spirit, and have in consequence been led thereby (48).

In this concluding passage to her text, Lee suggests that her cultural limitations allow her to be more (not less) receptive to the workings of the Spirit. More specifically, she suggests that conventional notions of belief -- bound to formal religious education and rigid church doctrine -- can do more to distract (even to blind) the "eye of faith" than to enhance it, whereas an active, unassuming belief -- "wishing to know" and "watch[ing] more closely," though from a position of unknowing -- can lead the believer beyond what only appears to be to the perception of a larger spiritual order. In this sense, Lee appeals not to her readers' sentiments (religious or otherwise), but rather to their doubts. Indeed, as John Ernest argues, Lee "anticipate[s] and even count[s] on the reader's resistance and skeptical response, and build[s] that response into [her text]" (273). "In this way," he explains, "skepticism becomes part of the constitution of faith, for skepticism stands as evidence of the human inability to fully comprehend a reality that Lee ... assert[s] is evident in [her life]" ("The Governing Spirit" 273).

In Lee's autobiographical account, this understanding of the dynamic nature of belief is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that, even after her own conversion and sanctification, Lee continues to look for evidence of a divine spirit at work both in her life and in the lives of others. Instead of perceiving her personal assurance of divine deliverance as a closed end within itself, as some readers might expect, for instance, Lee regards her private experience as a social-spiritual beginning of sorts towards the enacted belief of public ministry. In this light, Lee's emphasis on the physical manifestations of
divine inspiration serves to suggest that she is not merely an empty, passive vessel to be filled by God — "not merely a container for the spirit," as Ann-Janine Morey might add — but rather "the visible expression of what is spirit" (emphasis added, Morey 74), an active "instrument" or "handmaiden" in God's service (as Lee identifies herself, 37, 48). Working from within this revised position as "[God's] poor coloured female instrument," then — a position that encompasses and holds in tension both her cultural and spiritual identities — Lee in turn effectively revises the culture around her and helps to transform the position of her "enemies" and watchers.

The central moment of this cultural revision takes place when Lee's "Call to Preach" is renewed. Clearly aware of her position as a site of opposition between the laws of the A.M.E. church and the desires of God, Lee explains that, like the Old Testament prophet Jonah, she initially "lingered ... and delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord" out of a greater fear of being labelled by the church as an "offender" against women's proscribed roles (44). Indeed, once she does speak before the Bethel Church congregation, she has "fears of having given offence" not to God, but to the church leaders (45). And significantly, in describing the occasion in which she felt compelled to preach, she is careful to clarify that she was moved by "an altogether supernatural impulse," "scarcely knowing" what she had done (44). More importantly, however, Lee emphasizes the transformative power of divine spirit working through her. From her own position of faith, Lee maintains that she was "aided from above" in her preaching and that "God made manifest his power in a manner sufficient to show the world that I was called to labour

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25For a comparative discussion of the nature of being a divine "vessel," see Juster 25, 33.
according to my ability, and the grace given unto me" (emphasis added 44). The central evidence she cites for this conviction is that Richard Allen's own position has been revised. In fact, as a result of her spontaneous exhortation, Lee reports, Bishop Allen "now as much believed that I was called to that work [of preaching], as any of the preachers present" (45). In this unique moment, Lee suggests, her cultural and spiritual identities converge (if briefly) to provide her "a sweet serenity ... untasted in my bosom until then" (45). And, though she continues to suffer the opposition of other ministers and lay people throughout her ministry, Allen does -- from this point until his death in 1831 -- remain Lee's constant advocate.

The biblical text on which Lee felt inspired to exhort in the moment of her renewed calling (Jonah 2:9) signals within itself the dynamic quality of belief in shaping and altering both personal and social identities. As Lee reminds in aligning herself with this particular prophet, Jonah too was called to preach to his enemies; and, out of fear, he tried to escape his divine commission by sailing to a remote place. As recounted in the Old Testament narrative, however, "the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17).26 Notably, the passage on which Lee gives her exhortation marks the end of these three days and nights -- a measure of time, significantly, that prefigures the crucified Christ's time in the tomb, and

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26The call of a prophet in the Old and New Testaments often follows a pattern modeled on the call of Moses in the Book of Exodus. This pattern has various stages, often including an initial call by God, resistance from the one called, and reassurance or insistence from God in response, perhaps followed by a sign. By aligning herself with Jonah -- and, through him, other prophets -- Lee emphasizes her own reluctance to preach, subtly insisting that she does not act out of self-interest. As with all biblical prophets, in fact, Lee makes it clear that there is never any doubt in her mind (or soul) as to who is in control of her words and actions. She maintains throughout her autobiography that God speaks and acts through her at every turn, that it is God's power and authority through which she performs her ministry.
thus for Lee and her nineteenth-century Christian readers symbolizes resurrection from the
dead.\textsuperscript{27} Indeed, in Jonah's account, the belly of the fish is described as "the belly of hell"
(\textit{Jonah 2:2}). But at the instant in which Jonah declares the words of conviction that Lee
later cites -- "Salvation is of the Lord" (\textit{Jonah 2:9}) -- he is, at God's command, vomited
out of the fish onto dry land, and called to preach a second time. Like Jonah, Lee
suggests, she too has been delivered from desperate circumstances. As noted earlier, for
instance, she recounts her "general debility" and "ill state of health" in being denied the
church's permission to preach (40); and later, she describes her unfulfilled call to preach as
"a fire shut up in my bones" (42). When she can speak out of faith in God as her source of
salvation, however, she is "reborn" to a new spiritual identity; and, in fact, her call to
preach is also renewed.

In turn, Lee's exhortation on the Book of Jonah anticipates the transformation of
others through her ministry. As a nineteenth-century Christian audience would most likely
have recalled through Lee's comparison, for example, Jonah's story is marked for its
depiction of an exceptionally tolerant and forgiving God, one who pardons \textit{all} people
(including the wicked people of Nineveh), and not just those (like Jonah's Israelite people)
who believed themselves to be God's singularly "chosen" ones. Given his own reluctance
as a prophet, Jonah is stunned to see all of Nineveh -- "from the greatest of them even to

\textsuperscript{27}Lee could expect her readers to know that the story of Jonah reappears in the New Testament. In
\textit{Matthew 12:39-41}, for example, when doubting scribes and Pharisees demand a sign from Jesus, his reply
to them is this:

\textit{An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but
the sign of the prophet Jonas [same as Jonah]: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in
the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the
earth. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it:
because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.}

For additional New Testament references to Jonah, see also \textit{Matthew 16:4} and \textit{Luke 11:29-30, 32}.
the least of them" (Jonah 3:5) -- immediately repent and believe as a result of his divine message. Similarly, in the days and weeks following her initial exhortation, Lee reports, "Though, as I was told, there were lawyers, doctors, and magistrates present, to hear me speak, yet there was mourning and crying among sinners, for the Lord scattered fire among them of his own kindling. The Lord gave his handmaiden power to speak for this great name, for he arrested the hearts of the people, and caused a shaking amongst the multitude, for God was in the midst" (46). In drawing particular attention to the publicly recognized leaders and guardians of early nineteenth-century society -- the "lawyers, doctors, and magistrates" -- Lee signals here her awareness of the cultural hierarchy within (and against) which she works; and, by referring to herself as a "handmaiden" within this context, she subtly hints at her assumed position in such a hierarchy. Indeed, she is aware of the seeming incongruity of having such figures of authority gather to hear a black woman speak. But, by emphasizing her role as a handmaiden of God, Lee repositions herself not as a servant to established cultural authority, but as a mediator between human and divine. As an agent of God, she maintains, she is given "power to speak for [God's] great name," and thus to inspirit in all sinners -- from the "greatest" to the "least" -- an awakening to a spiritual order that shapes their secular order. In this way, Lee's text suggests, her own embodied faith works gradually to transform the society in which she lives.

For those readers whom Lee "may never see ... in the flesh," as noted earlier (Journal 31), she offers her autobiography as a manifestation of belief through which change may be effected. As more than a narrative account of personal faith and public ministry, that is, Lee's text itself embodies the open-ended, receptive quality of belief that characterizes Lee's
experience of divine spirit, and it thus becomes part of the very ministry it describes. This
is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Lee's encounter with the aforementioned deist
slaveholder. After hearing her preach at one of her first meetings, Lee recounts, the old man
"seemed to admit that coloured people had souls" — a notion he had before dismissed — and
Lee sees in this moment evidence of the active workings of God's spirit. Notably,
however, Lee's account does not conclude there. Indeed, just as her own initial awakening,
conversion, and sanctification were not spiritual ends within themselves, Lee emphasizes in
this particular episode an understanding of belief as a lived, dynamic process. Of the deist,
she continues to write, "He now came into the house, and in the most friendly manner
shook hands with me, saying, he hoped God had spared him to some good purpose" (47).
Significantly, the old man's modified perspective here is of a larger, unfolding purpose
beyond the immediate occasion. And, in fact, Lee reports that even though he had been "a
great slave holder" and "very cruel," it had since been said of him "that he became greatly
altered in his ways for the better" (47). Still, Lee resists the kind of narrative closure that
might suggest a static or final position of faith. Instead, she models through her open-ended
account the continually receptive nature of enacted belief: "[W]hether he became a converted
man or not," she writes, "I never heard" (47). Of her reading audience, of course, Lee
could say the same; she cannot know what effect her narrative will have on them. And yet,
through the same suggestive possibility with which she represents the deist, Lee makes of
her text a (re)positioning process of sorts, designed to inspire in her readers some of the
social and spiritual transformation evidenced in her listeners.

For twenty-first-century readers of Lee's autobiography, this insistence on and
representation of the dynamic nature of belief becomes a powerful lens through which to read and understand her text. Just as Lee came to recognize divine intervention and inspiration at the heart of her shifting self-awareness, so are scholars bound to recognize the centrality of religious experience in the shaping of individual identity for nineteenth-century writers like Lee. And, just as Lee presented to her early nineteenth-century readers what she perceived as evidence of the transformative process of belief in day-to-day life, so are scholars bound to recognize the role of religious expression in cultural revision. More importantly, perhaps, the specific nature of Lee's spiritual experience signals a need for scholarship that not only takes religious belief seriously, but also pushes beyond a broad, abstract idea of "Christianity" to the particularized layers of individual experience. As she moves from her own vague notion of God, through various Christian denominations, to the A.M.E. church, and from there through the more specific positioning forces determined by race, by gender, by expressions of faith, and by personal relation to God, in fact, Lee models for her readers the multiple levels of experience that they too must negotiate in order to understand both her position and her text.

This is not to say, of course, that scholars must adopt Lee's actual belief, but rather that the study of that belief should acknowledge its complexity. As Jenny Franchot argues, "religious expression invites dynamic analysis, for it is ambiguously both of the body and above it, both fleshly and immaterial. It cannot be looked at as an isolable phenomenon that enjoys explanatory priority over all other experience ... But neither can we dismiss religion as false consciousness" ("Invisible Domain" 840). With The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee in hand, this is more than an invitation; it is a
requirement. Clearly, belief is more than a static concept that provides only context for
Lee's narrative of self-discovery and public ministry; it is the source of that self-discovery
and the force behind that ministry. In turn, in the work of expressing the inexpressible,
belief functions in Lee's text as a narrative principle within itself -- not just as a concept to
be identified in the text, that is, but through the text. Along these lines, Lee's
negotiation of language (and even of silence) within the context of spiritual mystery -- not
despite it -- becomes one of the central achievements of her narrative, and thus requires of
Lee's readers a critical approach that does the same.
CHAPTER 2

READING THE DIVINE IN AN INDUSTRIAL WORLD: REBECCA HARDING DAVIS' LIFE IN THE IRON MILLS

To the readers of the April 1861 *Atlantic* magazine in which *Life in the Iron Mills* first appeared, reports Tillie Olsen, the story "came as absolute News, with the shock of unprepared-for revelation" (emphasis added 88). This was "[a] wide and distinguished audience" alert to the tragedies of slavery, Olsen reminds, but one largely unaware of the stultifying poverty and suffering of a new American working class. Rebecca Harding Davis' narrative, then, was both "an instant sensation" and "a literary landmark" (Olsen 88-89) -- exposing as it does the "dull" and "forgotten" lives of nineteenth-century America's mill workers (Davis 14). For twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers, too, Davis' story has become a literary revelation of sorts. Since its rediscovery and republication in 1972, it has been introduced to students of literature as a "pioneering achievement" -- a first in American fiction not only for its representation of relatively new subject matter, but for its introduction of new elements of literary realism as well (Roman-Royer and Hedges 42).¹

It is perhaps this emphasis on Davis as a literary pioneer, and on her early fiction as a model of a new literary mode, that has prevented scholars from recognizing an equally significant revelation in *Iron Mills*. Specifically, many modern scholars who uphold

Davis' text as a landmark of realistic fiction are often frustrated by religious elements in the story that don't seem practical to them in aesthetically "realistic" terms. Cecelia Tichi, for instance, maintains that "[t]he very sunbeams that symbolize the 'promise of the dawn' in Life in the Iron Mills can be seen as constituting a reversion to the romantic tradition" (emphasis added 23). And Coppelia Kahn, in turn, suggests that "[t]he sole weakness of the book ... is that Davis hints vaguely at some doctrinal, probably Christian answer" to the suffering of the working-class poor (117). For those scholars who have a generalized notion of religion or of Christianity, that is, Davis' narrative conclusions in particular are disappointingly sentimental, ineffectual, and even predictable.

In recent years, some scholars have begun to reexamine the religious elements contained in Iron Mills -- and to rethink their assumptions about these elements -- but the ways in which this reexamination reframes the story remain open to question. Sharon Harris, for example, examines "the complex narrative structure of 'Life' in terms of its movement from romanticism to realism [and naturalism]," and ultimately places Davis' treatment of traditional Christianity in a framework of irony (28). "[T]hroughout 'Life,'" she argues, "Davis employs irony, as heavy as the desolate air that clings to everything in the mill town, to deny passive Christianity as a means to salvation" (emphasis added 49). William Shurr, in turn, examines what he calls "the religious materials" of Davis' text as a means of identifying the story's narrator, and ultimately concludes that Life in the Iron Mills is "A Nineteenth-Century Conversion Narrative." Indeed, Shurr argues, the story's narrator (whom he determines to be the character Mitchell) "undergoes a total spiritual conversion to a particular kind of religion ... a religion that Davis and her contemporaries (at least the most liberal among them) would have recognized and applauded" (245).
Perhaps the most intriguing of recent studies, though, is Sheila Hassell Hughes' application of liberation theology to Davis' story. "The challenge," as Hughes defines it, "is to read Davis's novella in a way that takes seriously both its sociopolitical and religious critique as well as its spiritual vision." "Because Life in the Iron Mills begs to be read toward both political and personal transformation," she argues, "it does not neatly categorize as realist, reformist, or religious." Her approach, then, is a "religious reading' which allows for the interplay and intertextuality of the political and spiritual, the critical and visionary in Davis's text -- a tale that is radically political yet particularly Christian in its lineage and historical trajectory" (114).

As is revealed in this broad spectrum of responses to Life in the Iron Mills, the temptation is great to find resolution in the text, to identify a definitive position or conclusion in Davis' narrative construction. For scholars such as Tichi and Kahn, the conclusion is that Davis ultimately faulter at the end of an otherwise promising text. For others such as Harris, Shurr, and Hughes, Davis' use of traditional religious conventions in her narrative is not a weakness or failure on her part, but rather a conscious strategy for challenging the same vague, sentimentalized Christianity that modern readers so often dismiss. In truth, Davis' original nineteenth-century readers might also have expected a clear-cut and comfortable "Christian" solution to the social ills represented in her text. What they got instead, however, was a story in which the expected (and accepted) models of Christian reform fail. In Davis' terms, that is, the representative "pocket," "head," and "heart" of nineteenth-century society -- the then standard vehicles for reform -- fail to address the material and spiritual suffering of the working-class poor in any significant or
lasting way.

If there is a conclusion to be drawn about *Iron Mills*, then, it is perhaps that the story does not offer definitive conclusions -- or, that it "does not neatly categorize," as Hughes argues above. This is not to say that Davis provides nothing more than vague generalizations; her story in fact does more than merely model -- or, conversely, criticize -- "Christianity" in its traditional forms. At the same time, however, neither Davis nor her text offers a finished model of faith. Instead, *Iron Mills* seems designed to *reposition* faith in its multiple forms. This is a text, that is, in (and through) which Davis strips away the conventional practice of religion to reveal to her readers the presence of the divine in the world. At yet, even as Davis challenges the standard vehicles for expression of belief in her mid-nineteenth-century society, she stops short of dictating to her readers another fixed, if alternate, position. Indeed, Davis' aim is not to prescribe another systematic expression of faith; nor is she intent on simply exposing the failure of accepted models of faith. Rather, her aim is to discomfort her readers enough to seek new ways of reading the divine in the world, and thus new ways of both understanding and expressing belief. *Life in the Iron Mills* might thus most usefully be understood as a transitional text -- one that opens up the possibilities for faith in a world where the usual vehicles fail.

"Deeper yet if one could look": Penetrating Surface Appearances

The suggestion here is that Davis herself was something of a delivering prophet, guiding her readers in a renewed search for a spiritually significant truth in the world. And indeed, such a search is commensurate with the narrator's self-described purpose in the opening pages of the text:
I am going to be honest. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your
disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me,—here,
into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this
story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for
centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you. (13-14)

Within this early statement of intent, the narrator carefully establishes herself as someone
who can hear and see what is true or "real" where others are aware only of a "tiresome,"
"foggy" story, "only the outline of a dull life" (13).² Perhaps more importantly, she
identifies herself as someone who is capable not only of penetrating surface appearances to
retrieve the inward "secret," but also of giving voice to that secret even though it has "lain
dumb for centuries." By means of contrast, of course, the narrator characterizes her
nineteenth-century audience as mainstream middle-class Americans who must come
"down" from a position of self-centered comfort and privilege in order to hear her story.
"You, Egoist, or Pantheist, or Arminian," she continues, "busy in making straight paths
for your feet on the hills, do not see it clearly,—this terrible question which men here have
gone mad and died trying to answer" (14). Her aim in revealing "real" life in the iron mills,
then, is to deliver the reader from the lofty, abstract notions of spiritual salvation "on the
hills" down into the "mud" and "foul effluvia" of tangible life experience where human
souls are placed in jeopardy daily.

Notably, the narrator's means of revealing the centuries-old secret that has lain dumb,
and of expressing the "terrible question" that has gone unasked and unanswered thus far, is

²There is critical debate among twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary scholars regarding the gender
of Davis' narrator. For the purposes of this chapter, I will heed the predominantly accepted interpretation
that the narrator is a woman similar to Davis herself.
not through mere words -- for it is words alone, she suggests throughout, which repeatedly fail both to reach and to aid the socially and spiritually downtrodden. Instead, she offers her readers the "simple" story of two representative lives -- those of the young furnace-hand, Hugh Wolfe, and his hunch-backed cousin, Deb -- maintaining that it is the lives and the deaths of the working-class poor that demand "answers of redress" moreso than any carefully constructed speech or sermon. Remarkably, in fact, the narrator of Davis' story recognizes in the "begrimed," "stooping" lives of the mill workers not utter futility, but rather "the most solemn prophecy which the world has known of the Hope to come" (emphasis added 14). And it is in this regard that she sets herself far apart from both the "political reformer" and "private reformer" of her day, who have gone among the masses "with a heart tender with Christ's charity, and come out outraged, hardened," finding nothing redeemable in the workers' "vile, slimy lives" (15). Thus, while the narrator avoids simply handing her readers an easy, absolute answer to the question that asks, "Is there nothing beneath these lives? Is this all?" (to paraphrase, 15), she does not hesitate to express a personal belief apparently founded in a re-visioning -- perhaps even a conversion -- of traditional middle-class perceptions from a romanticized ideal to the "real." "I will tell you plainly that I have a great hope; and I bring it to you to be tested," she writes. "[My story] will, perhaps, seem to you as foul and dark as this thick vapor about us, and as pregnant with death; but if your eyes are as free as mine are to look deeper, no perfume-tinted dawn will be so fair with promise of the day that shall surely come" (14).

It is this idea of a "solemn prophecy of Hope" that can come from "the very extremity of darkness" which sustains Davis' repeated conviction that emotional and spiritual longing lie beneath even the coarsest human form, as well as her symbolic suggestion that one
soul-trying night — "a crisis in the life of one man" such as Hugh Wolfe (23) — bears more resemblance to Christ's own dark night of the soul than any of the lives of her "idle" middle-class (and purportedly Christian) readers. When the figure of Hugh first emerges from the pages of Davis' story, for example, he is described as a "morbid, gloomy man, untaught, unled, left to feed his soul in grossness and crime, and hard, grinding labor" (25). Presumably, this is the same type of man who would have been abandoned by the heart-hardened "reformer" denounced by Davis' narrator; and, indeed, the only apparent higher power that "governs" workmen like Hugh is the "vast machinery of system," the "unceasing" work and "unsleeping engines" which all but eclipse any specifically Christian influence. In the seemingly God-forsaken hell of the iron mills, in fact --"Dante's Inferno" or "t' Devil's place" by two characters' assessments (19, 20) -- the furnaces are only "partially veiled" on Sundays, "in half-courtesy to public censure," and they start up again "with renewed fury" as soon as the clock strikes midnight (emphasis added 19). Subsequently, "the engines sob and shriek like 'gods in pain,'" a notably tortured (and torturing) pagan replacement for "public" Protestant policy. And yet, even in this place where "official" American religiosity fails to hold sway, the narrator draws her readers' attention to the possibility of a purer human spirituality that struggles beneath the sooty, lifeless surface. Of the young but work-deformed woman Deb, for instance, Davis' narrator asks:

Deeper yet if one could look, was there nothing worth reading in this wet, faded thing, half-covered with ashes? no story of a soul filled with groping passionate love, heroic unselfishness, fierce jealousy? ... If anything like this were hidden
beneath the pale, bleared eyes, and dull, washed-out-looking face, no one had ever taken the trouble to read its faint signs (emphasis added 21-2)

And of Hugh, more pointedly, she writes of a man who possesses "a loving poet's heart" and "a great blind intellect stumbling through wrong" (25), and who -- "down under all the vileness and coarseness of his life" -- harbors "a groping passion for whatever was beautiful and pure" (22-3).

In focusing on particular people in a particular culture -- and in insisting that her readers look "deeper yet," "down under all the vileness" -- Davis suggests that faith is not shaped or enacted despite cultural obstacles, but through them. The spiritual journey on which she guides her readers, that is, is founded not on an abstract notion of pilgrim's progress "on the hills," but on the "faint signs" of divine presence "hidden beneath" the coarse details of individual lives. Thus, before the collective society of her readers can determine "answers of redress," Davis further intimates, they must first identify exactly where they are (and who they are) in the larger social-spiritual scheme.

(Un)Limiting Vision: Converting "Idle" Readers

At first glance, perhaps, Rebecca Harding Davis seems an unlikely author for this kind of story -- an unlikely seer past the mere "outlines" of working-class life, an unlikely prophet of either "crisis" or "hope" in the lives of individual mill workers. She was herself "a daughter of gentility and comfort," born to a "genteel" Pennsylvanian mother (Rachel Leet Wilson) and an Englishman father (Richard W. Harding) in 1831 (Tichi 4-5). Both at home in western Virginia, and later at the Washington Female Seminary in Pennsylvania, she received a standard education for young middle-class women, including "geometry,
literature, music, and drawing," and courses in "Evidence of Christianity, Mental Philosophy, and Butler's Analogy" (Harris 23). And, as a nineteenth-century "maiden lady" -- living with her parents until her marriage at the age of 31 -- she might be assumed to have lived a conventionally respectable, though insulated, domestic life.3

And yet, there is evidence enough not only in her fiction, but in the details of her life, to suggest that Davis did indeed see a world more "real" than did many others "on a hill" in her inherited social and economic class. While the Wheeling (then Virginia) of her youth and young adulthood "would seem silent and empty to this generation," she writes in her 1904 autobiography (Bits of Gossip 3), Davis recognized and experienced it as a national crossroads of sorts: between North and South, East and West. Built as it was on the banks of the Ohio River, that is, Davis' hometown was situated between slave states and "free," between crowded eastern cities and the wilderness of the West; and Davis herself took careful note of the exchanges made between southern cotton plantations and northern mills, and of the dramatic life transitions of European immigrants -- "strange people out of far-off lands of mystery" -- drawn "from Norway or Poland or Germany ... into the wilderness" (Bits 1, 4). In turn, notes Cecilia Tichi, "Davis gained much from the long outdoor walks that she later, in Bits of Gossip, termed 'vagabond tramps'" -- i.e. "pedestrian excursions in industrial Wheeling," then a center of iron and steel production, which exposed Davis to the very likes of the iron puddler Hugh Wolfe and his cousin Deb (6).

3For additional biographical background on Davis, see especially Harris; Olsen; Pfaelzer, Introduction; Tichi. While Davis wrote and published (albeit anonymously) Life in the Iron Mills while still unmarried -- and thus as Rebecca Blaine Harding -- I will use "Davis" throughout the chapter, as the name under which she came to be most widely known.
There is evidence as well that Davis was "a close observer of society" (as Tichi labels her, 6) in her years at Washington Female Seminary and beyond. Of the western Pennsylvania village in which she was schooled, for example, Davis noted that "[o]ld school Calvinism was the dominant faith," and with subtle criticism she perceived that "to the kindly, slow-going, conservative folk[,] the unpardonable sin and hell were facts quite as real and present as were their own borough laws and little brick jail" (Bits 205). She noted in turn (and with apparent contrast), however, that the local college and "girls' school" "kept the village alive and gave a scholastic flavor to its talk and habits of thought" (Bits 205). And indeed, it was here that Davis would have first attended poetry readings by the likes of Oliver Wendell Holmes, and abolitionist lectures by men such as Horace Greeley and Francis LeMoyne (Tichi 5). This exposure, combined with her first-hand experience at the geographic and cultural crossroads of Wheeling, gave Davis a keen, critical eye in Boston literary circles as well. On her first visit to Concord, Massachusetts, shortly after the publication of Iron Mills, for example, Davis spent what she would later call "one long summer morning" listening to Bronson Alcott "chant[ing] paeans to the war." "I had just come up from the border where I had seen the actual war; the filthy spewings of it; the political jobbery in Union and Confederate camps; the malignant personal hatreds wearing patriotic masks, and glutted by burning homes and outraged women," Davis later recounted. "This would-be seer who was talking of it," she wrote of Alcott, "and the real seer who listened," she wrote of herself, "knew no more of war as it was, than I had done in my cherry-tree when I dreamed of bannered legions of crusaders debouching in the misty fields" (emphasis added, Bits 34).

While Davis found herself in much the same social and cultural position as other
nineteenth-century women, that is, she was observant and informed enough to recognize
the complexity of the world in which she lived; and she got close enough (almost) to see
herself in it. Her geographic and cultural "locations" in western Virginia and Pennsylvania,
especially, brought her close to real and pressing concerns for mid-nineteenth-century
society. In the same month (April 1861) in which Iron Mills was published, in fact, the
U.S. Civil War broke out with a Confederate attack on Fort Sumter. And only two years
later, Davis would watch the original state of Virginia literally split between Union and
Confederate factions.4 Still, in contrast to late twentieth-century scholarship that draws
connections between the physical, cultural, and political oppression of white middle-class
women like Davis and the working class and black slaves of her day, Davis herself did not
settle for a neat connection between the two.5 Indeed, as the fictional narrator of Iron
Mills demonstrates, and as Davis' own autobiographical reflections reveal, Davis was
wise enough to recognize that while even a "real seer" at the physical "border" of poverty
or war might see more than most, she still cannot see more than those actually down in "the
thickest of the fog and mud."

Of course, Davis did not direct her writing toward those down in the fog and mud.
Rather, she was writing for the "would-be seers" of her day -- specifically, the editors and
readers of the Atlantic Monthly. And, rather than presuming to show them how to see, she
instead attempted through her text to show them the limitations of their vision. The
magazine itself was founded in 1857 by men who represented, in Ellery Sedgwick's phrase,

4Largely opposed to slavery, the residents of the region now known as West Virginia established a
separate state on June 20, 1863, after Virginia had seceded from the Union.

5Jean Pfalzer, for example, argues that even though Davis was a white middle-class woman removed
from the direct experience of working class life, her experience as a woman enabled her to identify with the
"emotional suffocation" and "oppression" of industrial workers ("Rebecca Harding Davis" 234-35).
"a Yankee cultural elite" -- New England "scholars, ministers, lecturers, editors, and writers" who were "largely Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, [and] liberal Protestant," but who were nonetheless "distinct from the dominant social and economic elites" of the time (4-5). In turn, notes Sedgwick of the magazine's early readership, "The Atlantic appealed ... to a cultural elite more than, as Harper's did, to a broad middle-class audience including the socioeconomic elite" (40). Notably, this same cultural elite included men that Davis would later criticize in her memoir; and it resembles as well both the lazy, dilettante Mitchell of Iron Mills, and the "idle" readers whom Davis addresses directly in that text. In Bits of Gossip, for example, Davis wrote of men like Emerson, Hawthorne, and Alcott that they were "always apart from humanity" (32), i.e. that "while they thought they were guiding the real world, they stood quite outside of it, and never would see it as it was" (32-33). More precisely, she criticized, "Whether Alcott, Emerson, and their disciples discussed pears or the war, their views gave you the same sense of unreality ... [T]he discussion left you with a vague, uneasy sense that something was lacking, some back-bone of fact. Their theories were like beautiful bubbles blown from a child's pipe, floating overhead, with queer reflections on them of sky and earth and human beings, all in a glow of fairy color and all a little distorted" (36). Why, then, would Davis elect to publish her first story in these founders' and contributors' pages?

As Sedgwick notes, "the Yankee cultural elite shared a respect for intellectual individuality and a tolerance for dissent." "Most were conscious of being a cultural minority," he continues, "and [most] were outspoken dissenters from the majority on such central issues as religious orthodoxy and political compromise with slavery." From this
position, then, "[t]hey founded the *Atlantic* not so much as an editorial organ for promoting particular doctrines, except in opposition to slavery, [but] as a platform for individual intellectual debate and literary expression" (9). During its earliest years, too, Sedgwick notes, "the *Atlantic* also spoke for social and political reform," particularly with regard to abolition, women's rights, and public education (10). Even as she would challenge received notions of "reform" in her own work, then, Davis was most likely drawn to these aspects of the early magazine's cultural mission.

Yet another aspect, too, might indicate the magazine's appeal to Davis, as well as aid contemporary scholars in understanding more precisely the nineteenth-century perceptions (and receptions) of a text like *Iron Mills*. Specifically, the early *Atlantic* developed a reputation for a kind of "theological liberalism" that "angered the orthodox and spurred its denunciation in the pulpit and religious press" (Sedgwick 10). During the editorship of James Fields in particular — the editor who would publish *Life in the Iron Mills* in 1861 -- "the *Atlantic* retained its reputation as a critic of religious orthodoxy" (Sedgwick 99). Harriett Beecher Stowe, for one, reportedly refused to publish most of her "Oldtown" stories in the magazine for this reason (Sedgwick 99). While twenty-first-century readers might consider Davis' story "mainstream" in a general understanding of religion, then, the fact that it was quickly accepted and published in the *Atlantic* suggests that the story was not perceived as religiously "conservative" or even "predictable" in nineteenth-century terms. Indeed, Davis' narrative conclusion especially -- in which she draws on the model of Quaker reform -- would most likely have been perceived as an intentional shift away from (and challenge to) "mainstream" Protestant models.

Finally, Davis was most likely drawn to the *Atlantic* as a vehicle for reaching a specific
type of reader -- indeed, the reader she consciously constructs and addresses in her story. By 1860, Sedgwick indicates, the Atlantic had "a probable readership of well over 100,000" (40). And, though this was a smaller readership than other popular magazines of the day (including Harper's, Scribner's, and the Century), the Atlantic "often carried greater intellectual prestige and represented an influential, relatively highbrow portion of that culture" (Sedgwick 3). Many of these readers represented the same elite Boston writers and scholars who published the magazine; still, the early Atlantic had a more extended influence as well. The magazine's "essential appeal," writes Sedgwick, "was to the broader, national segment of the middle class who cared for the life of the mind, enjoyed literature, opposed slavery, were liberal and nondogmatic in religion, and wished to stay in touch with the intellectual currents of the times." Indeed, he continues, "It was indicative of the Atlantic's target audience that teachers, postmasters, and clergy received a discount of one-third in subscriptions" (40). Davis most likely (and rightly) assumed that she would find a ready audience among this readership in particular. But even more clearly -- given her own narrative frame in Iron Mills -- this was a readership that she hoped not so much to please, but to challenge, and perhaps even to convert.

Terrible Questions and Divided Loyalties: "What shall we do to be saved?"

As modeled by her own account, Davis' narrator is one who "takes the trouble" to look "deeper into the heart [and soul] of things" with apparently refined vision; and, in turn, she credits supposedly worthless hands like Deb and Hugh with an ability to at least feel what are assumingly "cultivated" passions for love and beauty and truth, even if such
feelings cannot be intellectually quantified. Of Deb's similar capacity to see "deeper," for
example, the narrator writes, "She felt by instinct, although she could not comprehend it,
the finer nature of the man [Hugh] (22). Importantly, however, the crux and crisis of
Davis' story is the more common lack of such insight on the part of traditionally minded
U.S. citizens of the mid-nineteenth century, ranging from the middle-class men of the
story, to the general reader. On the critical night recounted in Life in the Iron Mills, for
example, the representative "pocket," "heart," and "head" of nineteenth-century patriarchal
Protestant culture encounter both the ash-covered laborer and the longing artist in Hugh
Wolfe, but still they fail to hear, see, feel, and (most importantly) act beyond the surface
boundaries of economic class. These men are, in fact, described as nothing more than
spectators of the mill works, having accompanied the overseer, Clarke, and a Yankee
reporter (himself only an objective observer of the manufactory) "merely for amusement"
(emphasis added 28). And, though their multiple failures are perhaps unconscious, the
lapse nonetheless marks a point of no return for Hugh, setting off for both him and Deb a
"great turning-day of life" (in the narrator's words) in which just "a little turn of the rudder"
can mean the difference between heaven and hell (26).

The question of who (or what) is in control of this "rudder" is one addressed at turns
by each of the social spectators. The first of these men is, appropriately enough, a son of
the mill-owner Kirby, and thus the direct product of an economic system concentrated on
crude materialism, ownership, and profit. As the "pocket" of a newly industrialized
America, Kirby sees not fellow humans in "his" workers, but rather "hands" that are all
but indistinguishable from the unceasing engines. "If I had the making of men," he argues
from a god-like stance, "these men who do the lowest part of the world's work should be
machines,—nothing more,—hands. It would be kindness. God help them! What are
taste, reason, to creatures who must live such lives as that?" (emphasis added 34). To a
man such as Kirby, to nurture a struggling mind or soul such as Hugh's would be more
cruel than to allow it to lie numb. Thus, when pressed with the "terrible question" of "Who
is responsible?" he simply responds, "Not I" (35). Instead, he wields a carefully trained
capitalist sensibility by countering, "What has the man who pays them money to do with
their souls' concerns, more than the grocer or butcher who takes it?" (35). Even more
notably, in defending his right to keep his own hands in his pockets, as it were, he echoes
the action of inaction taken by Pontius Pilate in the New Testament account of Christ's
trial and execution. "Ce n'est pas mon affaire," Kirby maintains. "The Lord will take care
of his own; or else they can work out their own salvation" (34). Later, too, he declares,
"I wash my hands of all social problems,—slavery, caste, white or black. My duty to my
operatives has a narrow limit,—the pay-hour on Saturday night. Outside of that ... I am not
responsible" (35).

With Kirby's hands thrust safely in his pockets, it comes to the representative "heart"
of nineteenth-century society to take up what the pocket cannot hold. Indeed, while Kirby

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6In Matthew's account of the Roman trial before Pontius Pilate -- in which the captured Jesus is handed
over to the governor for questioning and sentencing -- Pilate eventually washes his hands of responsibility
for Jesus' death. As recorded, Pilate believed that Jesus had done no evil, but rather that the chief priests and
elders had delivered Jesus out of "envy." Thus, when he sees that the others will not allow him to release
Jesus, Pilate "took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of
this just person: se ye to it" (Matthew 27: 24). (In Davis' text, the character Mitchell points out the
comparison between Kirby and Pilate, quoting the scripture passage above [36].) Kirby's further declaration
that "The Lord will take care of his own; or else they can work out their own salvation" also alludes to the
mockery of Jesus on the cross, in which the chief priests and scribes challenge Jesus to work out his own
salvation, or else trust God to take care of his own. "[S]ave thyself," they shout. "If thou be the Son of
God, come down from the cross." Or, "He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him:
for he said, I am the Son of God" (Matthew 27: 40, 43).
does not dismiss *in theory* the possibility that "wretches" like Hugh possess "some stray gleams of mind and soul," and while he does not negate the probability that there is a "God" who can help them (even though he appears to find fault with that God's original design in "the making of men," above), his abstract notions nonetheless stop far short of practical solutions. Doctor John May -- described as "philanthropist" and "heart" -- is thus pressed to provide an alternate response. Modeling the culturally received notions of philanthropy, Doctor May in fact appears to have greater compassion than Kirby for the "souls' concerns" of men like Hugh Wolfe; and yet, his conversation with Hugh reveals an intellectualized sense of responsibility that is similarly detached from the pragmatic. As Davis' narrator describes the scene:

[Doctor May] went to Wolfe and put his hand kindly on his arm. Something of a vague idea possessed the Doctor's brain that much good was to be done here by a friendly word or two: a latent genius to be warmed into life by a waited-for sunbeam. Here it was: he had brought it. So he went on complacently:—

"Do you know, boy, you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man?—do you understand?" (talking down to the capacity of his hearer: it is a way people have with children, and men like Wolfe,)—"to live a better, stronger life than I, or Mr. Kirby here? A man may make himself anything he chooses. God has given you stronger powers than many men,—me, for instance."

May stopped, heated, glowing with his own magnanimity. (36-7)

At this important moment, Doctor May does in fact recognize in Hugh God-given talents, even "powers"; and yet, his "vague ideas," his "friendly words," and especially his "sunbeam" idealism are exposed in the end as empty and ineffective. When Hugh agrees with
the doctor's contention that any man has the "right" to make of himself what he chooses, for instance, and when he then asks for aid in executing this right ("Will you help me?") Hugh asks quietly [37]), Doctor May quickly responds, "I have not the means ... I have not the money" (37). With this decisive stroke, May's high-minded, big-hearted ideals are reduced to the inaction of the "pocket"; and traditional nineteenth-century notions of "philanthropy" and "charity" are diminished as well. Thus, while his intent may have been to preach the "rights of the soul" (38), his actual response merely reinforces Kirby's attitudes, thereby suggesting to Hugh that one thing alone can "answer the riddle" of his lifelong predicament: money.

In this instant, Hugh finds himself awkwardly positioned between the pocket and the heart, between the material realities of the world and the (often ineffectual) sentimental response to those realities. Notably, this is a position quite familiar to those who cast a suspicious eye on nineteenth-century "religion" in its broadest sense. And in many respects, of course, this positioning is precisely the "little turn of the rudder" that becomes for Hugh the difference between heaven and hell.

As the representative "head" of this trio, Mitchell seems to hold the most potential for seeing "deeper" and reading what is "hidden beneath" the scene before him. And, in this capacity, he seems to be the one most capable of deflating the binary dilemma set up by Kirby and Doctor May. Certainly, Mitchell's retorts to both Kirby and May reveal a man insightful enough to recognize hollow arguments and to expose their patently unchristian underpinnings. Mitchell is, after all, the one to counter Kirby's disdainful, Pilate-like indifference with a pointed New Testament quote from Christ, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto
one of the least of these, ye did it unto me'" (36). In turn, he ridicules Doctor May's supposedly "magnanimous" gesture toward Hugh as an effort made not for Hugh at all, nor even solely "for... [t]he glory of God," but rather "for the glory of John May" himself (37). And, in both men, he exposes the crude emphasis on material solutions to Hugh's suffering, mocking, "Yes, money,—that is it. You've found the cure for all the world's diseases" (38). Still, the manner in which Davis' narrator describes Mitchell betrays in his character a sense of privileged detachment not unlike that exposed in the other two men.

As a visiting brother-in-law of Kirby (and thus indirectly married to the capitalist system), for example, Mitchell is "a stranger in the city,—spending a couple of months in the borders of a Slave State, to study the institutions of the South" [i.e. rather than to engage with the people] (emphasis added 29) -- details that suggest in him an emotional and intellectual distance which allows him to observe and to critique with little personal investment. In fact, he appears to be a man who approaches most aspects of life with a certain level of disinterest, a frame of mind presumably born of prolonged safety and comfort and the belief that few (if any) circumstances could threaten such an existence. He is, for instance, "an amateur gymnast...; a patron, in a blase way, of the prize ring; a man who sucked the essence out of a science or philosophy in an indifferent, gentlemanly way" (emphasis added 29). More pointedly, he has the capacity to "survey" the wretched mill workers and to "perceive" their hellish environment, but still keep "an amused light in his cool gray eye." He is, in short, a "thoroughbred gentleman" possessed of "a temper

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7 Mitchell, once again, quotes scripture directly, here referring to Matthew 25: 40. In this portion of Matthew, Christ suggests that the "righteous" will be rewarded for caring for the needs of the suffering ("the least of these"), for in doing so they minister to the Lord himself. And, in turn, the "accursed" will receive eternal punishment, for their neglect of those who suffer is the neglect of the Lord himself (see Matthew 25: 37-45).
yielding and brilliant as summer water, until his Self was touched, when it was ice, though brilliant still" (29). As the representative "head" -- the philosopher-thinker -- of nineteenth-century culture, then, Mitchell will be generous with his ideas (as well as his criticisms), but only insofar as his Self -- indeed, his soul -- remains untouched and uncommitted.

"Such men," concludes Davis' narrator, "are not rare in the States" (29). Davis herself found "such men" in the likes of Bronson Alcott and Emerson. And, no doubt, she assumed their presence among the original *Atlantic* readers of her story.

Because his own "blase," "indifferent" manner most resembles the "lazy, dilettante" and "amateur" psychologists whom Davis' narrator addresses as her audience (12-13), Mitchell becomes something of a beginning model for the kind of reading that Davis' art -- her story and the souls within it -- requires. This is perhaps best demonstrated through Mitchell's response to Hugh's art -- the rough-hewn but haunting Korl Woman. Despite a "tranquil" soul that is "bright and deep and cold as Arctic air," Mitchell brings to his encounter with Hugh a representative "taste, culture, [and] refinement" that can at least begin to read past the surface of the Korl Woman (36, 38). Indeed, although he approaches the "study" of Hugh and his sculpture with the self-possessed "air of an amused spectator at a play" (36), and although he eventually leaves this particular "play" with his carefully insulated Self intact, Mitchell can nonetheless perceive the artist's meaning much more readily and accurately than either Kirby or May. As the figure of the Korl Woman reaches out from the darkness of the iron works, for instance -- "her arms flung out in some wild gesture of warning" (not unlike the prophecy of Davis' own text), and her "muscular ... coarse ... powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing" (31, 32) -- the import of her form seems to elude all but Mitchell and the sculptor himself.
While Kirby and Doctor May walk around the sculpture "critical" and "curious" about its physical design, Mitchell himself stands "aloof, silent," and "touched strangely" by its gesture (32). And, while Doctor May is left baffled by the Korl Woman's significance, asking, "What does the fellow intend by the figure? I cannot catch the meaning," Mitchell alone appears to see "the soul of the thing" (emphasis added 32, 33).

In fact, even when Hugh attempts to explain the urgency behind the figure's "clutching hands" and "wild, eager face" — "She be hungry," he declares (33) — the doctor cannot see beyond the material surface. "Oh-h! But what a mistake you have made, my fine fellow!" he accuses Hugh in his own ignorance. "You have given no sign of starvation to the body. It is strong,—terribly strong" (emphasis added 33). In the end, it is left to Mitchell to translate, if only out of his own impatience. "May ... are you blind?" he flares. "Look at that woman's face! It asks questions of God, and says, 'I have a right to know.' Good God, how hungry it is!" (33-4). Essentially, Mitchell recognizes what Davis' narrator, too, maintains — i.e. that the lives and deaths of the working-class poor ask terrible questions of society and God with more force than any words. In this particular case, then, the rough image of the Korl Woman represents not only "the very type of her class" in solely bodily terms (as Doctor May first assumes), but the starving soul of that class as well. And the awful question she asks of the "pocket," "heart," and "head" of nineteenth-century middle-class society is this: "What shall we do to be saved?" (35).

Such questions within Davis' text far outweigh adequate answers. And indeed, to "catch the meaning" or even to "see the soul" of either Hugh Wolfe or his Korl Woman is quite different from actively addressing the pleas that each makes. Thus, while Hugh's art
has the potential power to "vex," "puzzle," even "trouble" Kirby, May, and Mitchell — thereby reaching across class boundaries, in one respect, by provoking dialogue and spurring hard questions — its effect is (apparently) not forceful enough to excite purposeful action in any one of the three men. Ultimately, as each man exits the scene, he reacts to Hugh in a manner appropriate to (and revealing of) his character: Kirby carelessly tosses money from his pocket; Doctor May holds out his hand "in a frank, generous way," and offers encouraging words; and Mitchell "simply touch[es] his hat, as to an equal, with a quiet look of thorough recognition," even though he believes there is nothing he can actually do for men such as Hugh (39). In fact, despite his earlier criticisms of Kirby's and May's seemingly misguided attitudes, Mitchell himself finally declares that even if he did attempt to help "these people," his efforts "would be of no use," since, he reminds, "I am not one of them" (38). Clarifying his logic, he argues:

Reform is born of need, not pity. No vital movement of the people's has worked down, for good or evil; fermented, instead, carried up the heaving, cloggy mass. Think back through history, and you will know it. What will this lowest deep—thieves, Magdalens, negroes—do with the light filtered through ponderous Church creeds, Baconian theories, Goethe schemes? Some day, out of their bitter need will be thrown up their own light-bringer,—their Jean Paul, their Cromwell, their Messiah. (39)

Arguably, such conclusions are meant to echo those of the "outraged, hardened" political and private reformers (aforementioned) who have already tried and failed. Perhaps more importantly, Mitchell's words subtly inform the subsequent events of Davis' story.
Divine Mysteries and Material Realities: At Odds and at Work in the World

For a man such as Hugh Wolfe, who himself represents one of the "lowest deep" -- a man, like the "thieves, Magdalens, [and] negroes" of American history, whose soul has been fed in "grossness," "crime," and "grinding labor" -- the light filtered through dominant (or perhaps dominating) middle-class sensibilities is indeed revealing, though in a way that both challenges and complicates those sensibilities. As Mitchell anticipates, "the light filtered through ponderous Church creeds, Baconian theories, [and] Goethe schemes" here serves not to uplift the "heaving, cloggy mass," but rather to baldly illuminate the seemingly insurmountable differences between social and economic classes. From Hugh's downtrodden perspective, in fact, men such as Kirby, May, and Mitchell especially, appear inaccessible and unreal. They represent a "mysterious class that shone down on him perpetually with the glamour of another order of being" (emphasis added 27). And, when the "sun-beam" of a few coins, a few words, and a "keen glance" rains down briefly on Hugh, it blinds moreso than it guides. The "smallest sign of refinement" in a man like Mitchell, for example, distorts Hugh's own perception of Self. Believing that he has found in Mitchell "a Man all-knowing, all-seeing, crowned by Nature, reigning" (40), Hugh can see in himself only "his filthy body" and what he assumes to be "his more stained soul" (emphasis added 30); and the extreme disparity fills him with "sudden loathing" (40). Thus, while the "pocket," "heart," and "head" of middle-class society are left apparently unaltered, the working-class "soul" is irrevocably changed. As the narrator describes Hugh's transforming "vision":

Do you remember rare moments when a sudden light flashed over yourself, your
world, God? when you stood on a mountain-peak, seeing your life as it might have been, as it is? one quick instant, when custom lost its force and every-day usage? when your friend, wife, brother, stood in a new light? your soul was bared, and the grave,—a foretaste of the nakedness of the Judgement-Day? So it came before him, his life, that night. The slow tides of pain he had borne gathered themselves up and surged against his soul. His squalid daily life, the brutal coarseness eating into his brain, as the ashes into his skin: before, these things had been a dull aching into his consciousness; to-night, they were reality.

(39-40)

With an interesting twist to Mitchell's own estimation, then, the presumably innocuous "light" filtered through the "mysterious class" in the forms of "reform" and "philanthropy" is -- if only by virtue of the starkly contrasting shadows it casts -- at once more enlightening and more devastating than perhaps even the amateur philosopher could have imagined.

In a more conventional narrative of personal revelation or conversion, Hugh might perhaps be expected to reach toward some hope of spiritual salvation in the wake of such a soul-baring experience. As in the traditional spiritual narratives with which Davis' nineteenth-century audience would have been familiar, for example — texts modeled on the patterns of Puritan narratives before them -- Hugh might have found increased spiritual strength in the face of great adversity, and thus evidence of God's mercy to sinners.8

Or, as in the spiritual autobiography of a similarly dispossessed woman like Jarena Lee, Hugh's personal suffering and ensuing vision might have led to spiritual conversion and a

8On the history of spiritual narrative in the United States, see especially Shea.
subsequent sense of social empowerment. In a stunning reversal of these stories of revelation, however, the trajectory of Hugh's vision is far less predictable and, in many respects, much more revealing. Rather than the eventual Christian conversion that Davis' readers might have expected, that is, Hugh instead finds in the "sudden light" flashed upon his life a fierce awareness of injustice and a debilitating loss of hope. Indeed, if there is conversion in this initial experience, it does not lead to an enabling view of the spiritually edified and socially efficacious man he could become, but rather to a suffocating impression of impossibility and futility. "A hope, trifling perhaps, but very dear, had died just then out of the poor puddler's life," writes the narrator upon Hugh's return to the dank cellar in which he lives. "He gave it up, that moment, then and forever ... [And] somehow, the man's soul, as God and the angels looked down on it, never was the same afterwards" (42). In a manner of speaking, the artist's longing for "someday" suddenly becomes the furnace-tender's certainty of "never." And, without even a "trifling" hope remaining, the narrator suggests, Hugh does not consciously press for divine assistance; rather, he wanders aimlessly, drifts idly.

This is not to say, of course, that Davis' text is either aimless or idle in purpose. Out of the seeming hopelessness of Hugh's combined cultural and spiritual position, in fact, Davis' narrator takes great pains both to construct a familiar narrative path from Hugh's experience, and to demonstrate that this path leads nowhere — at least given the way of the world as it is. On the one hand, for instance, the narrator repeatedly aligns the young puddler with the martyred Christ — from the soul-tortured night that marks "the great temptation of his life" (as the narrator describes it, 45), to the final hour of his life in which he dies a prisoner, "his arms outstretched" (60). On the other hand, she reveals the ways
in which Hugh proves himself eminently more human than the Christ to which he is compared. In positioning Hugh at turns along this continuum, rather than at fixed points at either extreme, Davis' narrator discourages a clear-cut reading of Hugh or of the world in which he lives. Instead, she suggests to her readers that divine mysteries and material realities are both at work in the world (though seemingly at odds with each other), and that it is only through daily life and the lived experience of faith -- even a frustrated, flawed, or faltering faith -- that "answers of redress" in such a world will be found.

The apparent disparity between mystery and materiality in the world -- a disparity replicated in the struggle between "pocket," "heart," and "head" in Davis' text -- is perhaps most clearly evidenced in Hugh's internal battle between the way his life is and the way it might be. In a scene that echoes New Testament accounts of Christ's tortured night at Gethsemane, for example, Hugh Wolfe spends a night ofanguished isolation in which his soul is tossed between the dull despair of dead hopes (his life as it is) and the stinging sense that it is "his right to live" as he believes middle-class men and women do -- i.e. "a pure life, a good, true-hearted life, full of beauty and kind words" (his life as it might be) (46). And, at the heart of his struggle is the tangible temptation that his cousin Deb has placed before him: money she has stolen from Mitchell's pocket at the mill. "I tell God's truth, when I say he had then no thought of keeping this money," the narrator insists, for

9 As depicted in the New Testament gospels, on the night that Judas is to betray him, Christ battles internally between the way his life is and the way it might be. He pleads with his divine father to relieve him of the mortal suffering that is to come -- "Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me," he entreats (Matthew 26: 39) -- while at the same time struggling to resist mortal temptation. "Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation," he implores his disciples that same night, for "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26: 41). Painfully alone in his torment, report the gospel writers, Christ declares that his "soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death" (Matthew 26: 38); and he is in such "an agony" and prays so "earnestly" that "his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22: 44).
"[t]he Welsh Wolfe blood was honest" (44). And yet, as he "suffered himself to think of it longer" -- to contemplate taking the money -- he was "blinded ... to delirium" (as in another vision) by the image of "himself as he might be, strong, helpful, kindly" (46). In the end, Hugh chooses at once the divine and the material: what he perceives to be "the life God meant him to live," and the money that he now sees as the means to such a life. Davis' narrator is quick to acknowledge that Hugh "did not deceive himself" about the illegality of his final action. "Theft! That was it," he apprehends with a mind that is "clear ... keen, intent, mastering" (45). At the same time, however, she emphasizes Hugh's apparent longing for a life not of outward material wealth, but rather of inward spiritual riches such as purity and goodness, truth and beauty. In making the choice that he does, the narrator suggests, Hugh questions the relevance of an act such as theft in the pursuit of his human "right" and spiritual equality. "Well, what was it to be a thief?" he asks himself. "What, in the world of Beauty, Content, and Right, were the petty laws, the mine and thine, of mill-owners and mill hands?" (47).

As "shallow" as this temptation might seem to nineteenth- and twenty-first-century readers alike, and as full of "error" as his argument might appear (to borrow words from Davis' narrator, 46), Hugh's logic nonetheless is informed by a culture that simultaneously values the idea of "another world than this,--of an infinite depth of beauty and of quiet somewhere" (47), and the notion that material well-being is somehow a measure of one's entitlement to that world. For a man of Hugh's background, for instance, God is as mysterious and seemingly inaccessible as the privileged class that "shone down" on him. "There was nothing of which [Hugh] was certain, except the mill and things there,"
explains Davis' narrator, "Of God and heaven he had heard so little, that they were to him what fairy-land is to a child: something real, but not here; very far off" (45-6). The failure here is not Hugh's, the narrator thus suggests, but rather that of a society in which social and spiritual privilege are assumed to be linked inextricably.

For Hugh himself, this assumption is reinforced in two key moments leading up to his final decision to keep Mitchell's money. In the first of these, "people going by to church" pass Hugh without any recognition of his "sharp struggle" (45). Indeed, though these people are self-professed Christians and public church-goers, they more closely resemble the markedly ineffectual "pocket," "heart," and "head" who are unable to read the meaning of "hunger" in Hugh's Korl Woman. "They did not know that he was mad," observes the narrator, "... mad with hunger; stretching out his hands to the world, that had given so much to them, for leave to live the life God meant him to live" (45). Instead, they "saw only a sickly mill-boy watching them quietly at the alley's mouth" (45). By contrast, Hugh feels as though "his soul within him was smothering to death" (45) And, as in the instant of transforming "vision" following his encounter with Kirby, May, and Mitchell, he casts a critical eye on the nominally Christian -- though passive -- people who walk past him. "His brain, greedy, dwarfed, full of thwarted energy and unused powers, questioned these men and women going by, coldly, bitterly, that night. Was it not his right to live as they ...?" (46)

Even when Hugh wanders into a middle-class church -- "a somber Gothic pile ... built to meet the requirements of a far other class than Wolfe's" -- what affects his senses is not the religious import of the place, but rather the far-off, fairy-land qualities of "shadows," "marble figures," "stained light," and "mysterious music" (emphasis added 48).
Significantly, too, the "burning, light-laden" words of the preacher — a man described as a "Christian reformer" possessed of a "fiery zeal" and "vast schemes" — effectively pass him by. As the narrator recounts the moment:

[The speaker's] words passed far over the furnace-tender's grasp, toned to suit another class of culture; they sounded in his ears a very pleasant song in an unknown tongue. He meant to cure this world-cancer with a steady eye that had never glared with hunger, and a hand that neither poverty nor strychnine-whiskey had taught to shake. In this morbid, distorted heart of the Welsh puddler he had failed. (emphasis added 49)

Once again, the narrator suggests that failure does not rest with Hugh alone, but rather with a society that relies too readily on received (and here, classed) assumptions of belief and salvation.

Though the "light-laden words" and "vast schemes" of Christian reform elude Hugh in this moment, what he and other members of his class have grasped is the notion that money can somehow deliver its possessor(s) to a magical heaven-on-earth. Imagining herself as something of a "witch-dwarf" who can bestow riches (albeit stolen) on Hugh, for example, the hunch-backed Deb envisions for the Wolfes a new life comparable to the nineteenth century's popular perception of heaven: i.e. a life "where t' shun shines, and t' heath grows, and t' ladies walk in silken gownds, and God stays all t' time" (emphasis added 43).10 Thus, even while the institutionalized words, practices, and theories of "mainstream" American Protestantism essentially (if unwittingly) exclude men like Hugh

10As Jon Butler notes, nineteenth-century Americans living in an increasingly industrial world often associated heaven with an ideal pre-urban world (Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling: Heaven and Hell in American Revivalism, 1870-1920).
from equal opportunity and participation, Hugh ultimately concludes that he can achieve both social and spiritual salvation on middle-class "Christian" terms: by buying (or, perhaps more accurately, stealing) it. "God made this money—the fresh air, too—for his children's use," he reasons. "He never made the difference between poor and rich"; rather, God "loved his children alike. Oh, [Hugh] knew that!" (47). When he finally decides to keep the money, then, Hugh does so with a "consciousness of power" fueled by "fancied rights," "dreams of improved existences," and the conviction that the money is, in actuality, "something straight from God's hand," sent to provide for him in a way that the Christian nation does not (47, 48).

Not surprisingly, the world of "petty laws" (as the furnace-tender has thought them, above) does not look upon Hugh's crime with the same divine justification as he does; rather, the society that Hugh questions so bitterly in turn indicts him not only for grand larceny, but for ungratefulness as well. The aptly-named Judge Day (an apparent "foretaste" of Judgement Day), for example, sentences Hugh to "nineteen years hard labor in penitentiary" — a sentence so "simple" for the judge to "utter" from his insulated position on high, suggests the narrator (51) — while the "philanthropist" Doctor May and his wife, reading the newspaper account from the comfort of their breakfast nook, bemoan "the ingratitude of that kind of people." "Scoundrel!" condemns the good doctor. "Serves him right! After all our kindness that night [at the mill]!" (emphasis added 50). Davis' narrator, however, is not so eager to judge Hugh either way; and, in guiding her readers to a way of seeing "deeper," past the apparent surface of people and events, she challenges their inclination toward quick judgment as well. Directly addressing her audience, she writes:
You laugh at the shallow temptation? You see the error underlying its argument so clearly,—that to him a true life was one of full development rather than self-restraint? that he was deaf to the higher tone in a cry of voluntary suffering for truth's sake than in the fullest flow of spontaneous harmony? I do not plead his cause. I only want to show you the mote in my brother's eye: then you can see clearly to take it out. (46)

Without accusing her readers of hypocrisy outright, the narrator here alludes to such a possibility with an abbreviated scriptural reminder. "I only want to show you the mote in my brother's eye: then you can see clearly to take it out," she says. According to New Testament scripture, however, the only way one can "see clearly" enough to remove the mere splinter in another's eye is to "first cast out the beam of thine own eye" (emphasis added, Matthew 7: 5). More specifically, as the gospels quote Christ, "Judge not, that ye be not judged ... [W]hy beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Matthew 7: 1, 3). With a deft turn here, the narrator exposes a Christian middle class self-assured of its place in a presumably superior moral order, while at the same time questioning (albeit indirectly) a belief system apparently founded upon blind allegiance to rigid doctrine moreso than the application of basic Christian lessons within the realm of actual human experience.

The middle-class assumption of religious and moral superiority is evident, of course, not only in the single-minded attitudes of otherwise sheltered spectators, but also in the extremity of the punishment to the lower-class "sinner." According to Hugh's jailer, Haley, nineteen years of hard labor was "a hard sentence,—all the law allows; but it was
for 'xample's sake." After all, he continues, "[t]hese mill-hands are gettin' onbearable" (51). In fact, the narrator states emphatically, nineteen years was "Half a lifetime!" for a nineteenth-century millworker, and therefore the same as a life sentence for Hugh. Most obviously, then, Hugh is held up by the law of the land (and thus of "a far other class") as an expendable reminder of a strict and indispensable moral code. To Davis' readers, however, Hugh seems designed "for 'xample's sake" in other terms as well. Indeed, as persistent as the narrator is in drawing none too subtle parallels between Hugh and Christ, she makes of Hugh an example of a world "gone wrong," though not exclusively (or even necessarily) because of "onbearable" millworkers. On the night that he sees only a "filthy body" and a "stained soul" in the contrasting light of the "mysterious" middle class, for example, Hugh despairingly questions, 'Is it my fault that I am no better? My fault? My fault? ... It's all wrong ... all wrong! I dunnnot understan'. But it'll end some day" (emphasis added 41). Later, when the nineteen-year sentence against him is read aloud, the jailer reports, Hugh "just looked up, and said the money was his by rights, and that all the world had gone wrong" (emphasis added 51). And finally, when he comes to the full realization that he will most certainly die in the penitentiary -- "but not until soul and body had become corrupt and rotten" (55) -- Hugh comes again to the same conclusion. "It was only right; he had done wrong," he reasons. "But was there right or wrong for such as he? What was right? And who had ever taught him? He thrust the whole matter away ... It was all wrong; but let it be!" (emphasis added 56). No fewer than three times in his short life, Hugh declares not only his working-class world, but all the world "gone wrong"; and perhaps this is the example -- the message -- of his death as well.

In a quietly dramatic final hour that echoes biblical accounts of Christ's death, for
instance, Hugh dies an accused criminal surrounded by other criminals. Having slit his own wrists (or perhaps carved them, with a "dull old bit of tin, not fit to cut kori" [57]), Hugh lay with "his arms outstretched," as on a cross, and he "made neither moan nor cry."

Instead, the narrator writes, he "only turned his worn face now and then to the pure [moon]light, that seemed so far off, as one that said, 'How long, O Lord? how long?'" (60). In this moment, Davis' narrator pointedly maintains, Hugh's "dumb soul was alone with God in judgment," not man. And, she shrewdly adds, with a scriptural allusion to Christ's final words, now carefully directed at her middle class Christian readers, "A voice may have spoken for [Hugh's soul] from far-off Calvary, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!' Who dare say?" (61)\(^{11}\) As with other charged moments in her text, Davis provides no clear answer to this question. Modern readers who suspect Davis of "sentimental" or "doctrinal" answers may of course see a heavier hand here. But in fact, Davis relies more on doubt in this moment than on assured faith. The fate of Hugh's soul -- and the spiritual fate, too, of those who failed him -- is left suspended in this question, and in the cultural and spiritual impasse of a nineteenth-century world "gone wrong."

"A Solemn Prophecy of Hope": Awakening Readers to Where They Are

By resisting clear answers and definitive conclusions, Davis forces her readers to approach the task of understanding divine presence in distinctly human terms. By resisting a narrative impulse to give her readers the comfortable (if conventional) "Christian" solutions that they might have expected, that is, she compels her readers to seek alternative

\(^{11}\)Davis quotes Luke 23: 34 here. Upon his crucifixion at Calvary, Luke reports, Jesus prayed for his persecutors: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."
ways of reading the divine in the world. In this sense, a text such as *Life in the Iron Mills* is remarkable not for any fixed or finished model of faith that it provides, but rather for the ways in which it repositions faith -- awakening readers not only to where they are headed, but also to where they are, both as individuals and as a society.

This repositioning force is evident in the uncertainty of how to read Hugh's life and death. In line with traditional belief, Davis' Christian readers would have understood Christ as "a just man" who died "for the sake of the unjust," sacrificing his life for the salvation of a sinful world. But if, by virtue of repeated textual comparison, Hugh is meant to resemble this Christ, the question remains as to whether he, too, is a "just" man persecuted by an "unjust" society, and thus whether his death, like Christ's, has some redemptive purpose. Even as a symbolic Christ figure, Hugh seems more *victim* of a world "gone wrong" than *savior* to it; and, in fact, even with his quiet longings and "strangely beautiful" art, he seems an improbable candidate for the working-class "Messiah" that Mitchell believes necessary for effective reform (above). Still, as Davis' narrator contends from the very beginning of her tale, it is the lives and deaths of men like Hugh, not necessarily the individuals themselves, that ask "terrible questions" of society and God. Arguably, then, though Hugh's hard, grinding life as a furnace-tender and his lonely, desperate death as a prisoner might seem otherwise unremarkable, they *are* forceful enough to draw the attention of a somewhat unconventional "light-bringer" (to quote Mitchell again) -- specifically, the Quaker woman who comes to tend Hugh's body the day after his death.

12See 1 Peter 3: 17-18: "For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well-doing, than for evil-doing. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit."
The only woman (aside from Deb) amidst a mass of spectating men and boys, the "still, gentle" Quaker woman is notable not for learned sermonizing, but rather for compassionate *doing*. "Of all the crowd there that day," writes the narrator, "this woman alone had not spoken to [Deb] -- only once or twice had put some cordial to her lips" (61). Importantly, too, she is described by the Quaker society name of "Friend," not as a "Christian reformer," and her approach to Hugh, even in death, is markedly different from that of any other character in Davis' story. Unlike the middle-class preacher whose words "passed far over" Hugh's grasp, and whose "vast schemes" were uninformed by actual experience, for instance, the Quaker woman demonstrates a quiet understanding of Hugh's suffering in even her most subtle actions. Staying long after the men have gone, for example, she places "a vase of wood-leaves and berries" beside Hugh's body and allows fresh air from the narrow window to "[sweep] the woody fragrance over the dead face," causing Deb to wonder aloud, "Did hur know my boy wud like it? Did hur know Hugh?" (62). "I know Hugh now," is the Quaker woman's simple reply (62). Subsequently, she is able to fulfill part of Hugh's former inward longing by burying his body in a place of beauty and quiet far removed from the squalid life he had known. Thus, in at least one respect, Hugh's death becomes an occasion for the patient Christian action of one woman to emerge as somehow more spiritually efficacious than the voluminous words of largely indifferent men.

Even more significantly, perhaps, Hugh's death seems to be the one event most responsible for Deb Wolfe's physical and spiritual salvation, since, again, it brings "light" in the form of the Quaker woman. Like the heaven-on-earth that both Deb and Hugh hoped the stolen money could buy, for example, the Quaker woman's home rises in the hills --
beyond the jail, and beyond the iron mills--as a place where "the light lies warm" and "the winds of God blow all day" (62), all at no apparent "price" of either social privilege or thievery. And, while the woman can offer Hugh only the repose of his body there, she can offer Deb the "long years of sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient Christ-love needed to make healthy and hopeful [her] impure body and soul" (63). Indeed, unlike Kirby, who washes his hands of all responsibility for Hugh and the working-class poor, and unlike Doctor May, who extends a magnanimous word but insists that he has not "the means" to help Hugh, and even unlike Mitchell, who argues that none but the poor can help the poor, the Quaker woman extends to Deb (and keeps) a life-altering promise. Speaking to Deb "in a low, sorrowful tone, like one who speaks from a strong heart deeply moved with remorse or pity" (and, notably, like no middle-class male voice throughout Davis' text), she encourages, "[T]hee shall begin thy life again,--there on the hills. I came too late [for Hugh]; but not for thee,--by God's help, it may be" (63).

Certainly, this "homely" and "coarsely dressed" woman has no more material means than any of the middle-class men and women who people Davis' pages. Notably, too, the meeting-house in which she and the Society of Friends gather is not a "sombre Gothic pile," but rather a "homely pine house" (63). And yet, what she offers Deb is both unconditional acceptance and inclusive participation within a human faith community--an experience that eluded Hugh even in his most soul-distressing hour. As the narrator reports, Deb lives out her days as a woman "much loved by these silent, restful people" (63); and, as a result of this "slow, patient Christ-love," she finds a hope in the "someday" of both earth and heaven that Hugh struggled in despair of. Thus, with Christ-like
similarity, the tortured suffering of one man (Hugh) becomes the promise of both social and spiritual redemption for another (Deb).

Still, what of the rest of the world "gone wrong"? In the end (as from the very beginning), it seems most likely that Davis intends her readers to learn the most from Hugh's representative life and death. As discussed above, and as evident throughout Life in the Iron Mills, of course, one of the narrator's main objectives is to press her readers to "see clearly," to "look deeper," to ask continually, "Is there 'nothing beneath' this surface, these lives?" In fact, even when she claims, "I cannot tell why I choose the half-forgotten story of this Wolfe more than that of myriads of these furnace-hands" (14) -- thus suggesting the almost commonplace nature of Hugh's existence -- she is insistent at the same time about the underlying importance of her tale. "I want you to hear this story," she urges. "There is a secret down here ... I want to make it a real thing to you" (13-14). And yet, as noted earlier, to comprehend the terrible question and to provide "answers of redress" are quite different things. "I can ... only give you the outside outlines of a night, a crisis in the life of one man," the narrator writes; "whatever muddy depth of soul-history lies beneath you can read according to the eyes God has given you" (23).

In other words, Davis' narrator can offer the basic details of Hugh Wolfe's final hours, and she can even implore her readers to "judge him justly" (as she does, 25); ultimately, however, each reader must listen and watch with the soul in order to discover what is "real." The state of the reader's soul, then, takes on primary importance for Davis' narrator: for, if the soul has been warmed both by compassion and self-sacrifice (as has the Quaker woman's), it will most likely work toward change; but if the soul is "bright and deep and cold as Arctic air" (as is Mitchell's), it will remain untouched and untouched in
its philosophy of privilege. Indeed, to "read according to the eyes God has given you," the narrator suggests, is to "[b]e just,--not like a man's law, which seizes on one isolated fact, but like God's judging angel" (25). And, in turn, to be "just" is to apprehend (as Hugh seems to do) that if even one part of the world has "gone wrong," then truly all is wrong.

By going to the cultural margins at the end of her text -- by leaving both Deb and her readers in the hands of someone at once Quaker and female -- Davis arguably presents less a sentimental conclusion than a striking cultural critique. Nineteenth-century society is indeed "all wrong," she suggests, if the only humanity that still functions is at the margins, and if the only salvation is the salvation of those who have never been part of the social-spiritual "center." Indeed, what this suggests about the cultural "mainstream" in which so many of her readers find themselves positioned, Davis intimates, is that the traditional "center" has become spiritually distorted. Davis is clearly intent on frustrating her readers' comfortable assumptions here. And yet, even as she leaves her readers without clear answers to the question "What must we do to be saved?," she does not leave them without hope. Both in and through her text, she locates her own "prophecy of hope" in unfixed but specific territory -- territory in which enacted faith and humanity exist, just not at the institutionalized center, almost as if waiting for an alternate cultural system in which the faithful recognize in Davis' collective "we" a shared, inclusive responsibility of both social and spiritual dimensions.
CHAPTER 3

"CHRISTIAN INGENUITY" AND THE SILENT PARTNER;
OR, WHAT IT MEANS TO SEE ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS
AS A RELIGIOUS WRITER

In an October 1871 column for The Independent, a prominent religious journal, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps identified the Woman Question as "the most important question God had ever asked the world since he asked 'What think ye of Christ' on Calvary" (qtd in Buhle and Howe, 360). It is altogether fitting, then, that the scholars who recovered Phelps' work some 100 years later would draw attention first and foremost to the author's feminist consciousness. Among Phelps' 57 published books and some 200 short pieces, in fact, the texts that receive the most significant scholarly attention today are those novels considered to be the "most vocally feminist": The Silent Partner (1871), The Story of Avis (1877), and Doctor Zay (1882). As both the context and content of the above passage remind, however, Phelps was more than a pioneering feminist writer. She was also a woman raised in the orthodox Calvinist environment of Andover Theological Seminary who, in her adult life, dared to challenge -- and in turn, to reimagine -- the available cultural and religious model(s) of her day. In her own lifetime, in fact, Phelps was first and best known as a religious writer. Her first novel, The Gates Ajar (1868) -- a text that rewrites the conventional nineteenth-century theology of mourning and re-

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2 The quote here comes from Kessler, "A Literary Legacy" 31.
envisions heaven — was one of the best-selling books of the nineteenth century, second
only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*

Most important to Phelps herself, perhaps, was the belief that the Woman Question
and divine questioning in the world were not separable. And, though it has most often
been studied as a novel primarily focused on issues of gender and class, *The Silent Partner*
provides an exceptional case study of this social-spiritual inseparability. As Phelps herself
states in the prefatory Note to this novel, "Had Christian ingenuity been generally
synonymous with the conduct of manufacturing corporations, I should have found no
occasion for the writing of this book." But, of course, she did write, finding "wide-spread
ignorance" in the place of ingenuity, and "abuses of our factory system" in the place of
Christian conscience. Writing at once from within and beyond her own cultural and
religious heritage, Phelps "made of her pen a pulpit" (to borrow Carol Farley Kessler's
metaphor), aiming not only to enlighten her readers via "the compilation of facts that go
to form this fiction" (as she writes in defense of her story's authenticity), but also to
encourage through her characters a more resourceful (and perhaps even more creative)
approach to Christian reform than that which she saw modeled in her late nineteenth-
century world.

As in Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) — a text which Phelps
knew — the most obviously "religious" (and most overtly evangelical) elements of *The
Silent Partner* are often troubling to contemporary scholars. In their Afterword to the 1983
reissue of the novel, Mari Jo Buhle and Florence Howe signal this dilemma when they ask,

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3 Buhle and Howe 357; Schnog 21. Kelly notes that *The Gates Ajar* sold more than 80,000 copies in
the United States and had a total of 57 printings by the turn into the twentieth century (7, 21n10). It was
also translated into fourteen languages.

4 "Fables Toward Our Future" 193.
"Is the novel strengthened or weakened by the flood and the death of Catty, Sip's young sister, imbued as they are with religious symbolism?" (377-78). More problematically, they ask in turn, "Is Sip's evangelism a fit human and literary conclusion for a woman who sees so clearly through class differences and the privilege that comes with money and position?" (378) The questions themselves betray a certain discomfort with the presence of religious experience and expression in *The Silent Partner*. And indeed, while Buhle and Howe suggest that these (among others) are "arguable questions" for the modern reader and critic, they have gone largely unexamined by twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary scholars. To date, instead, studies of *The Silent Partner* have focused primarily on issues of gender and class, of "women's work" and "woman's sphere," and of "a woman's right to self-fulfillment."5

The fact that Phelps devoted much of her written work to the concerns of women is irrefutable; however, the notion that either this work or these concerns can be addressed to the exclusion of spiritual considerations would have been for Phelps inconceivable. Even Susan Albertine — who is primarily interested in *The Silent Partner* as a work of "'economic' fiction," and in its central character, Perley Kelso, as a type of new "businesswoman" — maintains that Perley's eventual "insight into her position as a woman of the world" is "not efface[d]" by "the spirituality of the [novel's] conclusion" (242). Rather, Albertine argues, "The evangelical conclusion serves Phelps's purpose: women may do well and do good in business, despite the difficulties" (emphasis added 245). The suggestion here is that "spiritual and worldly consequences are united in Phelps's

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5 Albertine 238; Kessler, "A Literary Legacy" 28. See also Buhle and Howe; Fetterly; Kelly; Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* and "Fables Toward Our Future."
vision" (Albertine 245). More to the point, perhaps, a reading of *The Silent Partner* that separates Perley's social position from her spiritual position -- or a reading that subordinates the novel's religious concerns to concerns of gender and class -- is arguably a misreading of Phelps' intent altogether. Religious belief is a central, integrated presence in the novel that Phelps creates and in the world that she depicts in that novel; it cannot be removed from the larger cultural whole.

To those modern readers who read with a certain expectation of Phelps -- to those, in particular, who assume a certain convention in her work -- *The Silent Partner* might not seem altogether unique in its representation of social-spiritual reform. Phelps did in fact write this novel from within a world of increasing numbers of women's benevolent societies and reform organizations -- groups established on the premise that moral and social reform were necessarily intertwined. And yet, Phelps also wrote in response to this world, providing in (and through) her narrative a range of tangible, active, singularly embodied alternatives to the abstract and passive "Christian charity" that she perceived in her immediate white, middle-class society. In doing so, she joins other women writers who saw literature as an act of reform within itself. In many ways, in fact, *The Silent Partner* may be seen as a response to and extension of Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*. While Davis criticizes the traditional notion of "philanthropy" in her text, for example, Phelps begins to redefine philanthropy through the active ministry of characters representing various cultural positions. And, while Davis hints at the "dawn" of a new Christian reform at the end of her text, Phelps opens up for her readers plural manifestations of active belief in the world. Like Davis, Phelps seems intent not to offer

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6For background on the cultural work of women's clubs and reform societies in the nineteenth century, see especially Gere; Ginzberg; Sizer.
one fixed, absolute solution to working class conditions. Rather, she dares to imagine the possibility (the plural possibilities) of change -- both personal and cultural, at once social and spiritual -- and to present these possibilities to her readers. She is both preacher and guide, offering her readers a more complex and sophisticated (re)vision than many modern scholars have given her credit for.

"Do not write, unless God calls you": The Moral Responsibility of Literature

What does it mean to say that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps is a "religious" writer? For modern literary critics like Nina Baym and Lori Duin Kelly, it means that Phelps wrote texts that are unmistakably religious in subject (e.g. the afterlife) or genre (e.g. Sunday School books), but that these are distinct from her other work. In her recent reissue of three "Spiritualist" novels by Phelps -- *The Gates Ajar* (1868), *Beyond the Gates* (1883), and *The Gates Between* (1887) -- for example, Baym finds similarity across Phelps' work only in its intended audience. Like the Gates books, Baym notes, Phelps' most "important" novels (i.e. the "feminist" titles listed above) were "written for women"; but unlike the Gates books, she maintains, those novels are "secular works" (Introduction x). In her literary biography of Phelps, Kelly too separates Phelps' "religious" texts from the major body of her work. Kelly's chapter titled "Phelps' Religious Writings" focuses primarily on the Gates books, as well as *The Story of Jesus Christ, An Interpretation*, which Phelps published in 1897.

For Phelps herself, however, to be a religious writer was not a distinction to be made along the lines of subject matter or form. Indeed, simply to "write for a living" was to
Phelps a commitment of divine proportion. "Write, if you must; not otherwise," she cautions young would-be authors in her 1897 autobiography, *Chapters from a Life* (86).

"Do anything honest, but do not write, unless God calls you, and publishers want you, and people read you, and editors claim you," she continues. "Make your calling and election sure. Do not flirt with your pen" (86). The immediate concerns beneath Phelps' caution are the "heart-ache," "discouragement," and "eternal doubt" of a lifetime spent writing (87). And yet, implicit here as well are Phelps' deepest concerns for the role of literature in the world. "[T]he province of the artist is to portray life as it is; and life is moral responsibility," she argues in the final pages of her autobiography. "An artist can no more fling off the moral sense from his work than he can oust it from his private life. A great artist (let me repeat) is too great to try to do so" (263-4).

The inseparability of moral responsibility from either life or work was undoubtedly a conviction instilled in Phelps both in her childhood home and in the cultural environment of her youth. Born in 1844 to Austin Phelps -- "a Christian scholar" (*Chapters* 16) -- and Elizabeth (Wooster) Stuart Phelps -- "a writer of the simple home stories which took such a hold upon the popular heart" (*Chapters* 12) -- Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was raised in the orthodox community of Andover, Massachusetts. As both the daughter and granddaughter of Andover Theological Seminary professors, she received a rigorous education -- in theology, certainly, but also in "Mental Philosophy," physiology, astronomy, mathematics, history, Latin, literature, and art. In fact, "with the exception

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7 Phelps was named Mary Gray Phelps at birth, but eventually took the name Elizabeth Stuart Phelps to honor her mother's memory. Phelps' mother, Elizabeth (Wooster) Stuart Phelps -- who published under the name H. Trusta -- died when Phelps was eight years old.

8 Religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom labels the Andover Seminary the "West Point of Orthodoxy" (394). Phelps' maternal grandfather, Moses Stuart, was a minister and Professor of Sacred Literature at Andover, and reportedly one of the "most powerful defenders of orthodoxy" at the seminary (Ahlstrom 396). Her father, Austin Phelps, was a writer and Professor of Sacred Rhetoric and Homiletics at Andover.
of Greek and trigonometry," Phelps notes in her autobiography, the girls at Mrs. Edwards' School for Young Ladies ("known to the irreverent as the 'Nunnery'") "pursued the same curriculum that our brothers did at college" (Chapters 60-61). And, she emphasizes of these school years in particular, "The idea of character was at the basis of everything we did, or dreamed, or learned" (Chapters 53). Indeed, in looking back on her early life in "the Andover of New England theology," Phelps writes, "I have often been aware of being pitied by outsiders for the theological discipline which I was supposed to have received in Andover; but I must truthfully say that I have never been conscious of needing compassion in this respect" (Chapters 55). Rather, she acknowledges in even this earliest education the foundation for recognizing life as moral responsibility. "I was taught that I should speak the truth, say my prayers, and consider other people," she affirms; "it was a wholesome, right-minded, invigorating training that we had, born of tenderness, educated conscience, and good sense, and I have lived to bless it in many troubled years" (Chapters 55).

The influence of this particular training is evident even in Phelps' earliest literary publications. When she was only 13, she published a piece in Youth's Companion, a children's journal; and, while Phelps herself could recall few details about the story later in life, she did remember that "[i]t was very proper, and very pious, and very much like what well-brought-up little girls were taught to do, to be, to suffer, or to write in those days" (Chapters 20). A second "little contribution ... appeared in some extremely orthodox young people's periodical," she notes (Chapters 21). Eventually, she would publish as well. For additional biographical information on Phelps, see Bennett; Kelly; Kessler, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.
stories in the most distinguished periodicals of her day -- the Atlantic Monthly and Harper's -- as well as other magazines, including Hours at Home, Christian Watchman and Reflector, and Our Young Folks.\(^9\) And yet, because Phelps soon understood that "[o]ne cannot live by bread or magazine stories alone" (Chapters 81), she also engaged in other (and more lucrative) forms of writing: reviewing books for denominational weeklies like The Congregationalist; and writing Sunday School books for the Massachusetts Sabbath Society.\(^10\) While Phelps herself suggests that much of this early "religious" writing reflected the conventions and expectations of the culture within and about which she wrote -- while she acknowledges, for instance, that she "was not an artist at Sunday-school literature" -- she nonetheless saw the value of "doing hard work honestly" (emphasis added, Chapters 81). And indeed, it is arguably this work that led for Phelps to later writing that was more complexly religious in both its engagement of and challenge to cultural conventions.

Phelps was not at all naive about what it means to be a religious writer. Even from her late nineteenth-century perspective (and as if from our early twenty-first-century one), Phelps was aware of a certain "squeamishness" against what she labelled "ethicism" in art. In particular, she was aware of a resistance to literature as thinly veiled "tract." And yet, just as the "moral values" in life are "not to be evaded," she argues, neither are they to be evaded in the art that portrays life. The craft, then, is in the portrayal. "Helplessly to point the moral' is the last thing needful or artistic," Phelps maintains. "The moral takes

\(^9\) Some evidence suggests that Phelps published her first story in the Atlantic as young as 16; the first story attributable to her without doubt appeared when she was only 22 (Kelly 3-4).

\(^{10}\) Phelps wrote ten books for the Massachusetts Sabbath Society. Eight of these were published in two sets of four: the Tiny series (1864-1867), designed for readers six and younger; and the Gypsy series (1866-67), designed for readers twelve and older. See Kelly 5-6; Phelps, Chapters 81-85.
care of itself. Life is moral struggle. Portray the struggle, and you need to write no tract. In so far as you feel obliged to write the tract, your work is not well done" (Chapters 264). For Phelps, in fact, the success behind such an approach is that the divine is in the details. "The great way is to go grandly in, as the Creator did when he made the models which we are fain to copy," she insists. "After all, the Great Artist is not a poor master; all his foregrounds stand out against the perspective of the moral nature" (264). Thus, she demands metaphorically of the "squeamish" literary artist (and reader), "Why go tiptoeing about the easel to avoid it?" (264).

Arguably, then, to be a religious writer for Phelps is to acknowledge the moral struggle that is life and to recognize divine presence in that struggle. And in the years in which Phelps lived and wrote, she herself acknowledges, the United States "pulsated with moral struggle." In fact, she insists of her time, "No phase of society has escaped it" (Chapters 265). From her own birth in 1844 to her death in 1911, Phelps was witness to many of the country's most critical struggles: Civil War, industrial revolution and issues of labor, temperance, and women's rights. And true to her stated conviction that "one's first duty in the effort to become a literary artist is to portray the most important, not altogether the least important, features of the world he lives in" (Chapters 265), her own life's work was shaped by these struggles -- even as it (re)shaped them in turn. The collapse of the Pemberton Mill in neighboring Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1860, and the death of at least 88 "mill-people" to whom Phelps admits to having given no thought before, for example, eventually awakened in Phelps "some new perception of the significance of human tragedy" (Chapters 91) and resulted in her story "The Tenth of January," published in the Atlantic in 1868. In turn, Phelps' witness to "the helpless, outnumbering, unconsulted
women" left to grieve their men in the Civil War aroused in Phelps deep dissatisfaction with the existing "creeds and commentaries and sermons ... made by men" -- "prevailing beliefs" that "had nothing to say to an afflicted woman that could help her much" -- and inspired in her *The Gates Ajar* (*Chapters* 98). And Phelps' first-hand encounter with men (and their families) "ruined by the liquor habit" in Gloucester, Massachusetts, drew her unwittingly into temperance work -- "as unfamiliar to me as the gossip of Tahiti" (*Chapters* 206) -- but awakened in turn her "common sense and human heart" and eventually led to the novel, *A Singular Life* (1895).

In the more than 40 years that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote, she published numerous novels, short stories, essays, poems, and plays. And, in all of this work is imbued Phelps' own sense of life as "moral struggle," and of "great art" as a portrayal of this struggle. "I suggest that even moral reforms, even civic renovations, might have their proper position in the artistic representation of a given age or stage of life," she argues in *Chapters from a Life* (265). And, in fact, the breadth and variety of Phelps' written work reflects the wide-reaching reforms of her life's work, including factory reforms, temperance, the struggle for women's equality, and even antivivisection work. Refining her point further, Phelps writes, "I submit that even the religious nature may be fit material for a work of art, which shall not be refused the name of a novel for that reason." "Such

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11This story, seen as a precursor to *The Silent Partner*, was reissued with *The Silent Partner* by The Feminist Press in 1983.
12 For Phelps' own discussion of the "history" of *The Gates Ajar* -- i.e. its writing, its reception, and even its commercial tie-ins -- see *Chapters* 94-130.
13 Other works were influenced by Phelps' experience in Gloucester, including *The Madonna of the Tubs* and *Jack the Fisherman*. Similarly, the novel *Hedged In* was based on Phelps' reform work at Abbott Hill in the 1860s.
14 As noted earlier, Phelps published 57 books and some 200 short pieces in her lifetime. For a selected bibliography of this work, see Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* 153-59. For a narrative overview of Phelps' published work, see also Kelly 1-21.
expressions of 'ethicism' are phases of human life, are elements of human nature," she maintains. "Therefore, they are lawful material for any artist who chooses them; who understands them; and whose art is sufficient for their control" (*Chapters* 265). Once again, Phelps is quick to acknowledge the possible limitations of such material. "If [an artist] has sacrificed truth or beauty to didactics, he is, in so far, no artist," she clarifies. "But because he selects for his canvas -- whether from mere personal aptitude, or from a color sense, which leads him to prefer the stronger values -- the moral elements of life, he shall not for that reason be denied the name of artist," she further insists (*Chapters* 265-66). "'Omit Eternity in your estimate of area,' said a great mathematician, 'and your solution is wrong.'" Phelps finally offers as comparison. "Omit the true proportions of moral responsibility in your estimate of beauty, you who paint for 'Art's sake,' and your art is in error" (*Chapters* 265-66).

To repeat, then, what does it mean to say that Elizabeth Stuart Phelps is a religious writer? By Phelps' own model -- and at her own insistence -- the answer lies beyond theme and genre. A text such as *The Silent Partner* may in fact be "imbued ... with religious symbolism" and include an identifiably "evangelical conclusion" (to return to Buhle, Howe, and Albertine), for example, but these elements alone do not distinguish either the novel or its writer as religious. Rather, as her own life's work demonstrates, Phelps' religious nature as an artist is manifested in the moral understanding (in her term, the "ethicism") that she brings to the moral struggle around her -- an understanding that requires her increasing self-awareness, and which leads her repeatedly into a conscious (and conscientious) response to her world. In this sense, religion is not an answer that
proceeds the question; it is not a fixed framework to be imposed upon an existing condition. Rather, religion is a continually renewed (and renewable) framework that helps to guide Phelps in her response to the world as it is -- and as it might be. This mode of understanding is perhaps best articulated in Phelps' reflections on the nature of her childhood education. "In many a mental upheaval of later life, the basis of that theological training has made itself felt to me, as one feels rocks or stumps or solid things underfoot in the sickly swaying of wet sands," she writes. "I may not always believe all I was taught," she further clarifies, "but what I was taught has helped me to what I believe" (Chapters 69). Inherent here is Phelps' own answer to what it means to be a religious writer and person. What she has been taught is not a fixed end within itself, but a dynamic, shifting means of responding to the moral struggle of life. Aside from -- or perhaps, more accurately, beyond -- the general religious framework that Phelps comes with, that is, there is the repeated question of how to apply that framework to the world in which she lives. For Phelps, belief both shapes this response and is shaped by it; and it is this active role of belief in her life and life's work, arguably, that makes her a religious writer.

The Light of Incongruity: Awakening (Christian) Consciousness

Before the fall of the Pemberton Mills "forced [Phelps] to think about the mills with curdling horror," she acknowledges that she "did not think about the mill-people" with any more than "idle" curiosity (Chapters 89). Before her own personal loss in the Civil War led her to question what man-made "doctrines" can do for women "desolated by death," Phelps acknowledges that she "had no interest at all in any especial movement for the peculiar needs of women as a class," (Chapters 98, 99). And, before she was drawn
directly into temperance work, Phelps admits that she "paid no more attention to [that kind of service to humanity] than any woman of society" (Chapters 206). It seems altogether fitting, then, that the opening chapters of The Silent Partner portray the awakening consciousness -- and, more specifically, the awakening Christian conscience -- of an insulated, middle-class woman. Within the opening pages of her story, Phelps establishes the first of her main female characters, Perley Kelso, as a type most likely familiar to her nineteenth-century middle-class audience. Indeed, like the "blase," "indifferent," but "gentlemanly" Mitchell of Davis' Life in the Iron Mills -- a man "not rare in the States," as he is described (Davis 29) -- the young Miss Kelso is initially portrayed as something of a hot-house flower, a privileged but perpetually "idle" woman with a "superfluous life" who spends entire winter afternoons "sitting in her father's library, with her hands folded... in a crimson chair by a crimson fire" (10). More specifically, Perley appears to be as untouched as she is untouched (she with her hands folded, empty and inactive), insulated both literally and figuratively from the storm that builds beyond her protected sphere. Though the January night that opens Phelps' novel is cold and wet, for example, the library in which Perley "languidly" sits has all the "tints and scents of June" (11); and, though both Perley's father and fiance are business partners amidst the increasing blight of an industrial marketplace, she herself appears almost wholly sheltered from any physical, economic, and even emotional discomfort. "Given the problem, Be miserable," notes the narrator, "[Perley] would have folded her hands there by her fire, like a puzzled snow-flake in a gorgeous poppy, and sighed, 'But I do not understand'" (11). In short, Perley personifies "isolation in elegance," a state "not apt to be productive of thought," as Phelps' narrator concludes (12). And, again like her male counterparts, such a woman was
perhaps "not rare in the States" in the late nineteenth century.

Of course, there is one detail about Miss Kelso that sets her apart, making her seem more "rare," and it is this: "her descent from the Pilgrims could be indisputably proved" (10). Undoubtedly, Phelps' primary intention in relaying this fact is to reinforce Perley's social pedigree; and, indeed, such claims to an unimpaired bloodline reaching back to the "Pilgrim Fathers' whom America has taken so close to her heart" (as religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom labels them, 105) secure for Perley a position of social exclusivity and privilege akin to aristocracy -- i.e. Society with a capital "s." Even more importantly, however, Perley's irrefutable "descent from the Pilgrims" aligns her with the central religious foundations of the Anglo-American nation. Her personal heritage of a "chosen people" who believed themselves divinely appointed to carry the Christian gospel to the New World, and there to extend God's earthly kingdom, is a national heritage as well; and in this respect, perhaps, Perley's character comes to represent -- even to embody -- the enduring legacy of a dominant, white, middle-class Protestantism. Thus, even while she is portrayed as the somewhat vacant and detached daughter of "a gentleman manufacturer," Perley is at the same time the product of a traditional (and traditionally patriarchal) American Christianity. What happens to her throughout the course of the novel, then, might therefore be understood as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' transforming vision for the Christian nation at large.

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15The social and spiritual connotations of "pilgrim" have long been fused. In his *History of Plymouth Plantation* (begun 1630), Governor William Bradford wrote of his Mayflower company of English Puritan separatists as "pilgrims" in the spiritual sense -- i.e. those who journey out of religious motives. Over time, the term was extended to include any early Puritan settlers of New England, until eventually the use of "Pilgrim Fathers" arose as a rhetorical phrase and grew to be an historical designation (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
Initially, what happens to Perley is a jarring introduction to life (and lives) beyond her arm-chair comforts, concurrent with an abrupt interruption of her own life as she has known it. Specifically, on the same night that Perley encounters the second of Phelps' main female characters, the mill girl Sip Garth -- a direct encounter with poverty from which Miss Kelso automatically "sickened and shrank" (26) -- her own insulated world is disrupted by news of her father's sudden death -- news at which, with pointed similarity, "[h]er youth and happiness shrank with a sudden faint sickness at being disturbed" (emphasis added 33). Characteristically, the narrator explains, Perley "was apt to be amused by the world outside" of her sheltered sphere, "especially on stormy nights, for no reason in particular that she knew of, except that she felt so dry and comfortable. So clean too!" (17). Her "languid wonder" and "whimsy" are outmatched on this particular night, however, by Sip Garth's blunt manner and coarse honesty. Rather than feeling increased comfort in her distinction from the "great many muddy people," for instance, Perley feels "singularly uncomfortable" upon meeting Sip; and, rather than being entertained by the world she watches because she has "nothing better to do," Perley finds herself "singularly saddened" by her encounter with Sip (23, 28).

What emerges for Perley at this early phase is "[n]othing more definite than an uncomfortable consciousness" that other girls are not as "warm" and "sheltered" as she (28); and yet, this spare awareness is just enough to spark untried empathy in Perley when she learns of her own father's death. Unexpectedly orphaned, and with all familiar certainty thus shaken, Perley recognizes a possible similarity between herself and girls like Sip, where before she had seen only difference. "How disagreeable it must be to sit out in the rain!" she remarks with new compassion for those left to fend for themselves (33).
And thus, in one beginning moment of simultaneous awakening and loss, Phelps demonstrates how subtly but irrevocably one young woman's ways of seeing and understanding the world can be altered. The perceptions and beliefs that Perley had accepted as fixed and unquestionable begin to shift from this point forward; and Phelps no doubt hopes that where Perley goes, her readers will follow.

According to Phelps' early chapter headings, Perley's "uncomfortable consciousness" takes her "Across the Gulf" and along "The Slippery Path," signalling uneasy footing in unfamiliar territory. And, much like the narrator of Life in the Iron Mills, Perley's companion -- perhaps more often her guide -- along this ever-widening way is someone determined to expose hidden truths. "I don't mean to be saucy; but I put it to you honest," Sip Garth proclaims to an astonished Perley on the night of their initial meeting. "[A]nd I'm sorry to plague you with all your fine friends about . . .," she continues, "But it ain't often you'll have the chance to hear truer words from a rough girl like me" (30).

Considered through the eyes of a nineteenth-century middle-class audience, especially, Sip seems at first glance an unlikely preacher of any reliable word. In contrast to the refined and "resplendent" Miss Kelso, who speaks "on the instinct of a lady," for example, Sip is "a miserably meagre figure" who "swears a little" and walks with a rough masculine stride (21, 22). And, indeed, while Perley is marked as a direct descendent of the original founders of the American "city upon a hill," Sip is a parentless "girl in plaid," of unnamed origin and undistinguished social rank.16 At the same time, however, Sip possesses an

16I refer here, of course, to John Winthrop's famed 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," delivered aboard the Arabella sometime before the colonists set foot on North America. In this sermon, Winthrop identifies his fellow travelers as God's "elect" (akin to "the chosen" people of Israel) who have "entered into Covenant" with God, and who are thus commissioned to be "as a City upon a Hill" with "the eyes of all people ... upon us." Winthrop, in turn, refers to Matthew 5: 14-16: "Ye are the light of the

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understanding of life based upon personal experience, whereas Perley's largely innocent (though ignorant) assumptions are based almost exclusively upon what her self-protecting Society has handed her. While Perley "[sinks] languidly back into the perfumed cushions" of her carriage, for instance, her hands folded and her thoughts idle (after all, "What does any young lady think about on her way to the opera?" the narrator wryly asks [16]), Sip confronts her world head-on, battling the elements with "manful struggles" and using her hands to strike out "as a boxer would," all the time keeping her balance despite her small stature (17). In turn, while Perley's face expresses only "sweet dimness," Sip wears a "shrewd smile," suggesting a strength of mind and spirit that matches her physical tenacity (25).

Most importantly, Sip's hard-earned knowledge pierces a surface appearance of the world that Perley has never before thought to look beneath. "You don't know, but I do," Sip declares to Perley in revealing as superficial the differences between a working-class theatre and the opera. "I tell you it's the plating over that's the difference; the plating over," she maintains. "At the [Blue] Plum we say what we mean ... We're rough and we're out with it. Up at this place they're in with it. They plate over ... It's different from us, and it ain't different from us." Ultimately, Sip's words are a challenge to Perley (and to the readers of her story) to look past and through socially constructed boundaries to a more basic human commonality. "Don't you see?" she presses. "No you don't. I do. But you'd ought to ... You're old enough and wise enough" (emphasis added 29-30). In Sip's experience, there is no excuse for a young woman of apparent cultural training and

world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."
economic means to be blind to the hypocrisy of her immediate circle, while at the same time shrinking from the lower classes as something "filthy," especially when a mill girl of considerably lesser means and opportunities does see deeper. And in this one respect, at least -- this capacity for honest insight -- Sip is actually a more likely preacher of "truer words" than any other, both in this early narrative moment and throughout the course of Phelps' novel.

As Phelps' central characters, then, Perley Kelso and Sip Garth represent more than individual women separated by economic class; they also represent two ways of seeing, understanding, and acting within a shared nineteenth-century nation. And, in a none-too-subtle effort to enhance the impact of their respective roles, Phelps' narrator casts the two women's initial meeting as an occurrence of both biblical scale and significance. "Who has not noticed that fantastic fate of galleries, which will hang a saint and a Magdalen, a Lazarus and a Dives, face to face?" she asks. "And who has not felt, with those transfixed glances, [which are] doomed ... to struggle towards each other,—vain builders of a vain bridge across the fixed gulf of an irreparable lot,—a weariness of sympathy...? Something of this feeling would have struck a keen observer of Miss Kelso and the little girl in plaid" (21). Clearly, the narrator's principal aim here is to emphasize the marked contrast between a wealthy manufacturer's daughter and a poor mill hand; and yet, the models of comparison are profoundly significant within themselves. Who, after all, is the "saint" at this early point in Phelps' story, and who is the "Magdalen"? As noted from the start, Perley is indeed refined and apparently untouched by the corruptions of nineteenth-century American industry; still, she is hardly a saint. In fact, the narrator notes, Perley "was nothing of a philanthropist, not much of a Christian," and the few words she has for Sip

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during their first exchange are induced not by "justification by faith, and conscience," but rather by "inbred sin and courtesy" (22). In short, the vague cordiality Miss Kelso does show Sip comes more from a sense of social propriety (i.e. good manners) than from a conscious commitment to Christian behavior. Even the "very little Sabbath-school class" she has taught as part of her traditional social duty "demanded of her very little thought and excited in her very little interest," the narrator reports, suggesting that Perley acts out of little more than decorous habit.17

In turn, while Sip is rough and somewhat brazen in both her manner and speech, she is hardly the Magdalen of popular cultural interpretation — i.e. at best a penitent sinner, at worst a common prostitute. In Davis' Iron Mills, Mitchell himself categorizes "Magdalens" together with "thieves" and "negroes," the "lowest deep" of nineteenth-century America (39), demonstrating the assumption that most nineteenth-century readers would make of such a label. And indeed, while most biblical scholars today agree that the sainted Mary Magdalen (who was reportedly the first to witness the risen Christ) has been mistakenly identified with the unnamed sinful woman who anointed Christ's feet in the house of Simon, they also acknowledge that this identification of "Magdalen" as "reformed prostitute" has been accepted in the traditional cult of Mary Magdalen since medieval times.18 Sip Garth, however, despite the temptations to young women who work and

17It bears noting here that in certain Christian traditions, "saint" is a title given to those people formally beatified or canonized by a church body in recognition of their heroic virtue or martyrdom. In the Protestant tradition especially, however, the term "saint" also is applied generally to all of the faithful who show holiness through renunciation of sin, personal moral goodness, and service to God. The Protestant who is "justified by faith" has thus consciously acknowledged his/her sinfulness through the act of repentance and is in turn assured of divine forgiveness through faith. Arguably, Perley is not easily aligned with either of these definitions at the opening of Phelps' novel.

18See Deen 200-05; Farmer 292-93. The "sainted" Mary Magdalene, who is reported to have stood vigil outside Christ's tomb and who thus first witnessed his resurrection, appears in Matthew 27: 56, 61;
live in the mill town of Five Falls, conducts a life as respectable as her conditions allow.

She is, in fact, the model of a "decent girl," and her reach extends well beyond her own person. To her deaf and dumb sister, Catty, for example, Sip is mother and sister alike, determined to create a room that is "pleasant to come home early" to, and thus "better than the dark street-corners" that the girl might wander after work (emphasis added 87). And, to her female peers as well, Sip is a conscientious guardian of virtue. "I don't set up to be a preacher, Nynee," she says to one mill girl about to "go to the devil" in the shape of a "miserable Irishman" named Jim, "but I do set up that Jim's no company fit for a decent girl." Here, too, though Nynee's home is a crowded company boarding house infested with rats and prone to flooding, Sip succeeds in persuading her that home is still "better than" the "mischief" that lurks in the alleys (emphasis added 122).

The narrator's second biblical allusion, to "a Lazarus and a Dives," is perhaps more straightforwardly aligned with Sip and Perley, pointing as it does to the Christian parable of the beggar and the rich man. Indeed, according to the New Testament story, Lazarus lay starving and neglected at the gate of Dives, who himself is "clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day" (Luke 16: 19). When the men die, however, Lazarus is carried "into Abraham's bosom," while the rich man descends to hell. Phelps'}
Christian readers, familiar with the parable, no doubt understood its intended lesson of divine justice in the "hereafter"; and, in turn, they most likely recognized the implications to Perley's soul (and, by example, to their own) should she continue to ignore the lower classes shut out by her earthly gate. The comparison becomes even more complex, however, when the potential role of the beggar is considered. When Abraham explains to Dives that, after death, the "great gulf" between heaven and hell is "fixed" and therefore impassable, for example, the damned man begs Abraham to send a risen Lazarus to warn his brothers on earth. '[I]f one went unto them from the dead," Dives argues, "they will repent." Abraham counters, however, that Dives' brethren have "Moses and the prophets" to guide them; and, "[i]f they hear not Moses and the prophets," he concludes, "neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" -- i.e. even a risen Christ.

Interestingly, here the rich man asks that a poor beggar -- the embodiment of his own neglect, but also the proof of God's help and mercy20 -- be sent as a sign to those who remain idle. And, though his request is denied in the parable, Phelps arguably follows through with the suggestion by crossing Sip's path with Perley's.

More to the point, Phelps' narrator characterizes Sip not only as a preacher of "truer words" (as above), but as a sign of great portent as well. Describing the girl in plaid as a "jagged outline" against the "light and scent and soft babble" of the upper-class opera

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20 According to biblical scholar Eric May, the name "Lazarus" signifies one who has "put his trust in God's help." (The name Dives is simply the Latin word for "rich man"). See May 584. As with the figure of Mary Magdalen, cultural interpretation often confuses the Lazarus of Christ's parable with Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha who was raised from the dead by Jesus in a final miracle that resulted in the conversion to Christ of many who witnessed it (John 11: 1-44). This blurring of distinctions between biblical figures, however, might be useful in reading the multiple suggestions that Phelps possibly intends to make here: e.g. about awakening from a living death, about conversion to a new way of living, about placing trust in God's help, and about the restoration of life in and through Christ.
house, in fact, the narrator casts Sip as something of a dark Moses figure cutting a path through the surface "plating." "The crowd broke in beautiful billows about her and away from her," she writes of Sip. "It seemed not unlike a radiant sea out of which she had risen, black and warning as a hidden reef. She might have been thought to be not so much a foreign horror as a sunken danger in the shining place" (29). Though she is not risen from the dead, Sip does emerge here from the depths of working-class life, and her disturbing presence is clearly intended as a reminder that human souls can indeed starve at the gates of pleasure, both in this life and the next.

In even her earliest characterizations of Perley and Sip, then, Phelps succeeds in blurring culturally drawn lines between rich and poor, saint and sinner, saved and damned; and, indeed, it is through this gradual dislodging of rigidly held (if largely unexamined) assumptions, her novel suggests, that effective change occurs, for individuals and communities alike. Through increased first-hand exposure to Sip's direct truths, for example, Perley slowly awakens to marked incongruities between what she has been led to believe about the working class, and what is more objectively accurate. As a young woman of whom little more had been required than "to sit by the fire and order dinner" (40), Perley had always accepted what she had been told by the men in her life. What little she knew about the lower classes, in fact, "[s]he had dimly understood ... from her father and the newspapers" (24); and, in turn, she had concluded that her fiance, Maverick Hayle, "must be right" about the mill workers, since he "in his business connection had occasion to know" (31). What she learns both from Sip and from personal observation, however, not only contradicts her "dim" understanding, but also undermines her assumptions.
When Perley encounters Sip a second time, in the mill town of Five Falls, for instance, she attempts conversation by merely parroting what she "had heard her father say ... in times long past"; but her words only reveal her naivete. "You have good prompt pay," she echoes to Sip, and "I suppose that you could not have a better or healthier occupation. You get so much exercise and air" (50-51). Not surprisingly to a twenty-first-century audience, perhaps, Sip reacts to Perley's ideas with "a suppressed laugh," but Perley herself is genuinely "shocked" when the mill girl carefully counters with the history of her own working-class family: e.g. an abusive, alcoholic father and an overburdened mother (both now dead), and a sister born "deaf--and ... queer, and dumb" (to quote Sip), each bound by extreme poverty to 14-hour work days in grueling, unyielding factory conditions (51-52). To Perley, such details are not only "new," but "confusing" and "troubling" due to what they imply. "But such things ... do not often happen in our New England factories!" she desperately insists in response to Sip's story (emphasis added 52), for indeed, to accept what Sip tells her would require that she reject all that she has held as true. "I have always been brought up to believe ... that our factory people, for instance, had good wages," she later explains of her ignorance. "And I always thought ... that such people were -- why, happy and comfortable" (emphasis added 95). What Perley ultimately learns, of course, is what each of the writers represented in these chapters ask of their readers: that she must see with the eyes God has given her (to paraphrase Davis), and trust in what personal experience tells her above and beyond mere words. Indeed, as Sip knowingly advises, "You'd better find out for yourself" (53).

It is important to recognize, of course, that even as Phelps constructs the interaction between Perley and Sip -- even as she complicates the lines traditionally drawn between
them -- she is herself on a slippery path of sorts. In dealing with issues of class, of gender, of moral responsibility and standards, that is, Phelps faces a moral struggle similar to Perley's. She is trying to write her way into or through a form of moral understanding; and, in this search, she takes on different roles. Still, she is circumscribed by her own cultural position. Indeed, as a white middle-class woman, Phelps is necessarily limited in her ability to create (or to "perform") the roles of different people in her culture, and thus to "find out for [herself]." This requires of her a kind of performative imagination concerning those whom she is not. And yet, at the same time, this narrative role-playing is a way of pushing against or beyond those same cultural limitations.

Idle Hands Filled With an "Unsought Gift": Moses At the Mill

The incongruities between what Perley has been told and what she is beginning to see, between what is professed and what is actually practiced, are at the heart of her growing consciousness of struggling communities beyond her own comfortable Society; and, in fact, she responds with a new determination "to see with my own eyes and to hear with my own ears how people live who work in these mills" (107-08). Even as Davis first suggests in *Iron Mills*, however, awareness is only a first step toward lasting reform. Indeed, in Davis' text, Kirby, Doctor May and Mitchell -- the representative "pocket," "heart" and "head" of nineteenth-century middle-class America -- all recognize the "vile" conditions and "grinding labor" of working-class life (15, 39), but each denies any personal responsibility. In turn, Maverick Hayle and his father -- the surviving partners in the Hayle and Kelso mills and, in Phelps' similar terms, the representative "brain" of society (72) --
are not only aware of but active participants in an economic system that subjects whole families to the rank squalor of rotting tenement houses and finds ways of "getting round" child-labor laws. These men too, however, refuse responsibility, arguing that "[t]he state of the market is an inexorable fact ... before which employer and employe ... have little liberty of choice" (67-68). Beyond the Pilate-like act of simply "washing their hands" of all liability, in fact, these manufacturers insist that their hands are uncontrollably tied.

Thus, it is not only when Perley begins to question conventional assumptions, but also when she begins to act upon her newly expanded knowledge, that Phelps' novel begins to answer and extend Davis' social-spiritual challenge. "As long as I am unmarried and independent, Maverick, I am very much in earnest in my wish to manage my mills myself," Perley asserts with a vigorous sense of purpose and duty (not to mention independence) far removed from her former idleness (62). And, indeed, the foundations of her own personal concerns work to subtly shift, even to reverse, the prevailing public roles of "brain" and "heart," "pocket" and "hands" in the late nineteenth-century workplace. "It is not my property ... which I am reluctant to intrust [sic] to you," Perley explains to both Maverick and his father; rather, it is "[m]y people,--the people" (62-63). By drawing attention to human lives beyond physical "property" and to human souls beyond material "profits," Perley here effectively revises the popular notion of "successful" business management. And, consequently, by involving herself in such management, she begins to reshape ideas of philanthropy and responsibility.

Most importantly, Perley's refusal to accept that her own hands are either tied or washed clean of all culpability signals a shift in her identity as both a Christian and a citizen of the nineteenth-century American nation. These potentially distinct roles were considered
inseparable by mainstream nineteenth-century society; and for Perley, too, they remain inextricably bound. At the same time, however, the terms become redefined for her in the increasing light of incongruity between what she has "always been brought up to believe" and what she has discovered on her own among the working class. Upon waking from the "dream" in which she believes herself to have been born, for instance, Perley is dismayed by a singular realization: "[W]hy Maverick!" she declares, "I am a member of a Christian church. It has just occurred to me" (132). To the traditionally minded audience of Phelps' text, as to the traditionally minded Maverick Hayle, the awakening of Perley's conscience was no doubt admirable within itself. Indeed, Maverick finds her "earnestness" (as he perceives her newfound concern about the workers) to be "refreshing... very pretty and feminine" (63-64). And, in turn, he suggests to her a conventional (and again traditionally "feminine") means of fulfilling her Christian duty: "You can go down into our mission school and take a class" (64). Anything more, he intimates, would be "meddlesome."

What Perley means by "Christian" here, and what her increasingly estranged fiance assumes, however, are markedly different. Specifically, Perley is struck suddenly and clearly by the irony of a church membership who, like her, are Christian in name and by Pilgrim descent, but who drift idly through life in patently unconscious, unchristian ways. "Maverick! I've been a lay-figure in life long enough, if you please," she insists in deprecation of her own passive existence. "Maverick, Maverick! I cannot play any longer," she concludes (emphasis added 133).21 In short, Perley exchanges nominal

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21 The term "lay-figure," in the connotation that most directly fits Phelps' context here, refers to a person "of little intrinsic importance," even a "nonentity" -- both of which Perley suddenly perceives herself to be. In more literal terms, the phrase refers to a mannequin, a wooden model of the human body -- suggesting, too, that Perley is not a "real" Christian, but rather someone only posing as (or "playing" at being) a Christian. More provocatively, perhaps, the common meaning of "layman" or "laity" refers to someone who is not a member of the clergy (i.e. not a cleric or person "in orders") -- in which case the text here
Christianity for genuine Christian purpose, and the surface posturing of a Christian life for ardent personal commitment.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the relative suddenness of Perley's awakening, paired with her equally sudden and ambitious plans for "a library in our mills ... And relief societies, and half-time schools, and lectures, and reading-rooms, and I hope a dozen better things" (133), becomes a target for criticism in Phelps' text. Maverick, as one representative voice among others, ridicules Perley's concerns as little more than temporary "amusement," the "diversion" of "a young lady with nothing else to do" -- though still extravagant enough, he fears, to "run athwart the business" (134-35). What Maverick and the middle-class male custodians of American industry perceive as socially "soft-hearted" and economically "soft-headed," however, are to Perley just the opposite: i.e. the "clear eyes," "kind heart," and "clear head" of a woman finally and irrevocably "waked up" to the whole of life beyond a dream-like sphere (128). Most importantly, Perley understands her personal transformation to be the work of divine providence, and herself to be a chosen handmaid of God. As she attempts to explain to Maverick, with a fascinating reversal of the role of "hands" in her nineteenth-century world:

I cannot tell you ... how the world has altered to me, nor how I have altered to myself, within the past few weeks. I have no words to say how these [mill] people seem to have been thrust upon my hands -- as empty, idle, foolish hands, God knows, as ever he filled with an unsought gift! (139)

suggests, with some clever foreshadowing, that Perley has been one of the "laity" long enough, and feels now with some urgency the need to take on the duties of one ordained to religious service. Her new religious role will not, of course, be recognized as "official" in traditional, orthodox ways; but that, I argue, is part of Phelps' design here. (Oxford English Dictionary)
As was true in the spiritual experience of someone like Jarena Lee, Perley's experience here is past description; there are "no words" to express it. And yet, she understands with clarity that God is the direct and active source of her awakening.

Indeed, in one of her most startling moments of clear (though troubled) consciousness following a visit to the Five Falls tenement houses -- a moment carefully juxtaposed with that in which she recognizes herself as the vessel of a divine gift -- Perley exhibits a physical manifestation of emerging knowledge and insight that is markedly similar to the spiritual possession and subsequent conversion experience documented by Lee. As the narrator describes Perley's "alarming" state, "The young lady sat, white to the lips, and trembled violently; her hands covered and recovered each other, with a feeble motion ...; the eyes had burned to a still white heat; her breath came as if she were in pain." Seconds later, with an abrupt move that symbolically breaks her tie to social-spiritual convention, Perley "suddenly rose with a little crouch like a beautiful leopardess and struck the gray and green chess table with her soft hand," snapping her engagement ring in two (127). Thus, even while Perley's "sudden" concerns attract skepticism -- to the extent that her male partners attempt to limit and silence her further -- Perley moves forward with the conviction that she has been selected and authorized by God to minister to the impoverished bodies and souls of those who fill her mills.

Of course, given the dismissive yet uneasy attitude with which Perley's personal conversion is received, there is also little surprise that her means of ministering to the working-class poor becomes a source of criticism as well. She does not, after all, divest herself of all material wealth in order to live simply among those she serves, as a more conventional missionary might do. Nor does she permanently rescue any of the mill hands
from the drudgery of factory work or the gloom of tenement living, as even Davis' Quaker
woman does for Deb. Rather, Perley applies her share of factory profits to improved
working and living conditions, and she holds regular "evenings" in her home -- gatherings
designed to entertain and edify the factory workers with classical music, literary readings,
cool desserts, and the comforts of an elegant parlor and a lush lawn. Through the eyes of
her Society peers, Perley's efforts are again perceived as "lovely, Quixotic, [and] queer,"
"dear, [and] delightful," even "exceedingly original" (222, 226), but at no point are they
considered either important or productive. Instead, quips one middle-class matron,
"Society is a great loser by [Perley's] philanthropy," not only because her attentions to the
working class detract from her proper "duties" as a "lady," but also because her "superb
house" is overrun by "[t]hose people" and her benevolence is a "fanatical" waste of money
(239-40).

From an early twenty-first century perspective, certainly, Perley's efforts may not
seem so "exceedingly original." At a cursory glance, in fact, it might appear as though
Perley continues to work from a conventional (even predictable) nineteenth-century model
of benevolence -- one that works from the "top" down, for instance, rather than "across the
gulf." And yet, from her own late nineteenth-century perspective, Phelps has Perley do
something that is perceived as threatening to her class. If Perley were performing her
philanthropy "correctly," that is, she would be praised, not criticized. Instead, however,
Phelps attempts both here and across the trajectory of her narrative to take Perley beyond
what is comfortable. She sets Perley on a journey, the terms of which Perley does not
fully understand. And, in doing so, Phelps is on a comparable journey. By working
through different responses to Perley's actions, and by thus exploring different sites of
moral authority, Phelps herself is trying to look beyond what she knows how to see. This is real moral struggle for Phelps; and, by her own understanding, this is what it means to be a true artist.

Despite her perceived limitations, what Perley does accomplish along her journey is a primary bridging of the "gulf" illustrated by Phelps at the opening of the novel. Indeed, as Sip Garth maintained from the moment of her first meeting with Perley, "it's the plating over that's the difference" between the classes; and, in fact, notes the narrator, "With the exception of a little plainness about their dress ... and an air of really enjoying themselves," the thirty mill workers gathered in Perley's home "did not, after all, leave a very different impression upon the superficial spectator from that of any thirty people" who might be collected at a Society event (225). In other words, what Perley provides through her "evenings" is a communal space in which basic spiritual equality is acknowledged and in which human "head," "heart," and soul can be nourished outside the domain of "hands" and "pockets." "All that I do is treat these people precisely as I treat you," she explains to one of her more stiffly conventional Society peers; and in this singular approach she demonstrates her revisioning of traditional ideas about society, duty, and Christianity. Quoting Isaac Taylor to the Society women who would deride her changed life, she argues that "'the law of Christ spreads ... very far beyond the circle of mere pity ... and demands from everyone who names the name of Christ, the whole residue of talent, wealth, time, that may remain after primary claims have been satisfied'" (242).

Based on the language of Taylor's lesson, it is consistently the "law of Christ" that dictates Perley's awakened actions, not the law of the land or the law of man; and, in turn,
it is the "law of Christ" that successfully "spreads" far beyond the "circle" of Perley's
insulated sphere, making what was once wholly exclusive now increasingly inclusive, and
what was once "mere pity" and impersonal charity now hands-on service and personal
acceptance of responsibility. Even more importantly to Phelps' overall design, though, it is
the "law of Christ" that effectively transforms Perley from a spiritually "elected" and
socially privileged descendent of the Pilgrims to a divinely commissioned but humble
pilgrim making gradual progress among the common people. Indeed, with a deft reversal,
Phelps' narrator describes the earliest stages of Perley's experience as that of an immigrant,
suggesting that the thoroughly "American" Miss Kelso's transformation results not only
from crossing beyond the threshold of her inherited "city upon a hill," but also from
stripping away the inherited supposition of social-spiritual superiority. After visiting Sip's
tenement house for the first time, for example, Perley "felt like a stranger setting foot on a
strange land. Old, home-like boundary lines of things to which her smooth young life had
rounded, wavered before her" (98). By blurring the traditional boundaries of Perley's
world, and by dislodging the comfortable certainties of her historically elevated heritage,
Phelps in effect undoes the dominant dictates of the land, challenging the long-held
assumption that spiritual salvation is determined by either birth or class. Perley's "gift,"
after all, is entirely "unsought" (and thus unexpected) by her; and, as discussed above,
nothing in her idle past has ordained her as an obvious "light-bringer" (to borrow from
Davis' text). Rather, according to her own description, Perley "feels" her way in a
sometimes faltering but always determined way. "I am not a reformer," she explains of her
new role in society (the term here extended by a lower-case "s"). "I am only a feeler. The
world gets into the dark once in a while, you know; throws out a few of us for groping
purposes" (241).

Even while Perley's Society peers ridicule her actions as "eccentric" and "odd," and while Perley understands and speaks of herself as at least a "groper" and at most an "empty, idle, foolish" vessel filled with divine purpose, she is revered by the mill workers of Five Falls as much more. In fact, as a result of her devotion to "Christ's work" -- described in the narrative as "earnest work, solemn work, solitary work, mistrusted work, work misunderstood, neglected, discouraging, hopeless, thankless" (256) -- Perley finally emerges as something of the saint alluded to by Phelps at the novel's beginning. "God bless her, and the ground she treads on, and the air she breathes ... and every dollar of her money, and every wish she wishes," Sip Garth exhorts at one of Perley's evenings, for Perley has become both a moral and material savior of sorts to the people she once knew so little about. "There's those of us here, young girls of us ... that she has saved from being what you wouldn't see here tonight," Sip maintains with worshipful fervor. "There's little children here that would be little devils, unless it was for her. There's men of us with ... hearts like hell, and never a friend in this world or other but her" (238-39).

More to the point, perhaps, Perley is modeled in Phelps' text as a kind of nineteenth-century Christ figure, the apparent embodiment of goodness -- even godliness -- sent among the seemingly God-forsaken. When the laborers of Hayle and Kelso's financially troubled mills threaten to strike over reduced wages, and when Maverick Hayle and his father in turn demand that "[w]e will shut down the mills first" before agreeing to a compromise with the "hands," for instance, Perley pacifies the discontented crowd -- and prevents the strike -- by exhibiting as much "trust" and "confidence" in the workers as she does to the people of her own class. To quote Perley herself, she "treats [the workers] like
reasonable beings" (248); and the scene, as recounted alternately by Phelps' narrator and Sip Garth, is richly imbued with religious significance. When Perley steps out amidst the angry workers, for example, it is on "the Lord's day" -- their "pay-day," Sip explains, and "all the Lord's day we know much about" (120) -- and Perley is both upheld and enveloped by the crowd as a figure of purity and calm. "There was a kind of shame and a sense came to us, to see her standing so quiet in the rain," reports Sip (251). Indeed, despite the mud and rain, Sip says, "That day there seemed to be a shining to [Perley]. We were all worked up and angered; and she stood so white and still" (emphasis added 251). Later, after Perley has taken the "uncommon course" of speaking plainly to the workers about "why we must reduce their wages" (248), there is by at least one account a "churchliness" about the mill yard (254). And, finally, when Stephen Garrick, a partner of working-class origins, merely "brushed the hem of [Perley's] garment" -- as followers of Christ were known to do -- his hand "trembled visibly" and he had a sense of having "touched a priestess in a waterproof" (254).

Phelps' language in this moment almost perfectly echoes two New Testament passages in which suffering followers of Christ seek healing in a most unassuming way. Matthew 9: 20-21 reads: "And, behold, a woman, which was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years, came behind [Jesus], and touched the hem of his garment: For she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole" (emphasis added). Similarly, Matthew 14: 35-36 reads: "And when the men of [Gennesaret] had knowledge of [Jesus], they sent out into all that country round about, and brought unto him all that were diseased; And besought him that they might only touch the hem of his garment: and as many as
touched were made perfectly whole" (emphasis added). Notably, each passage is an illustration of both Christ's divinity and his followers' humility; and Phelps' parallel language seems designed to suggest something similar of Perley's situation. At the same time, however, both New Testament accounts are traditionally interpreted as examples of active faith -- i.e. a faith that does not manifest itself in passive waiting, but rather a transformative faith that is achieved through trust in God and personal commitment to a new way of life. Indeed, as Christ says to the woman in the first account above, after she has touched him, "Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole" (emphasis added, Matthew 9: 22). Thus, in her use of the familiar New Testament phrase, Phelps also subtly reminds her readers that Perley's transformation comes through a shift from idleness to an exercised faith, and that the workers, too, essentially seek a new life by demonstrating trust in the Christ-like Perley.

Admittedly, Perley's ascent from the relative unimportance of a "lay-figure" (as she labelled her earlier self) to a position of spiritual exaltedness is a potentially troublesome move for twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers, particularly along the lines of class difference. Perley has been criticized in recent scholarship, in fact, for becoming "an agent of the voice of oppression" as a result of her "acquiescence in reducing the workers' wages" (Fetterly 26-7); and, indeed, to have the factory workers look "up" to her with such religious enthusiasm does suggest that she has become more of an idol than a minister to the working-class poor. Even in her careful narrative choice and depiction, however, Phelps arguably anticipates and answers such difficulty. That Christ would operate through her is, by Perley's own understanding, "an unsought gift." She is trying not so much to be Christ to the workers as to do "Christ's work" among them; and, in doing
this, the power of Christ is revealed (indeed, "shines") through her. In Phelps' narrative, in turn, Perley comes to represent the presence of Christ in a changed (and changing) world. Through Perley, that is, Phelps attempts to address the question of how to be Christian -- and how to do "Christ's work" -- in an increasingly industrial and secular society.

Perley's struggle with active faith in this particular society, and Phelps' own struggle with how belief functions in this world as it is, underscore yet another presence in this particular episode -- specifically, an Old Testament presence that illuminates the fuller complexity of Phelps' allusions to Christ. In the same moment that Perley is associated with Christ, she is associated with Moses; and in this intricate commingling, Phelps calls attention not only to the importance of Christianity, but to the importance of its historical foreground as well: a history of earthly oppression, of a journey to an unseen Promised Land, and of an unlikely prophet and deliverer. Indeed, while Sip Garth rises "black and warning as a hidden reef" out of the "radiant sea" of the opera house at the opening of the novel, an unlikely messenger of "truer words" to at least one benumbed middle-class soul, Perley cuts through a "murmuring," "growling," "roaring" "sea-swell" of disgruntled factory workers like a ray of light in the strike scene, a similarly "uncommon" envoy to the socially and spiritually bereft. "The people parted for her right and left," the narrator reports. "She stood in the mud, in the rain, among them. They made room for her, just as the dark day would have made room for a sunbeam" (250-51). The "sea-swell" that needs to be parted here is, of course, the workers' rising frustration and despair; and Phelps' Old Testament allusion suggests as well that this "sea-swell" will swallow up the oppressors as the workers are led toward the Promised Land. Just as Moses' authority comes from his
willing association with the Israelite slaves (rather than the rulers), though, so is Perley enveloped not by a "flood-tide" of anger, but by "a sudden tide of respectability" (251).

"There was a minute that she looked at us, and she looked -- why, she looked as if she'd be poor folks herself, if only she could say how sorry she was for us," reports Sip. But then, Sip continues, "she blazed out at us" -- as a prophet might do (251). By distinguishing Perley as something of a Moses figure here, in combination with clear allusions to Christ, Phelps both anticipates and pushes against the potential false-consciousness of middle-class philanthropy. The Mosaic model becomes another means by which Phelps can reposition Perley. And through this particular repositioning, she is able to demonstrate that religious consciousness and character are much more complex than most critics -- nineteenth- or twenty-first-century -- often allow.

At its most basic level, the Moses story is a class story. According to the Old Testament narrative with which Phelps' readers would have been long-familiar, after all, Moses was raised as a member and future leader of an oppressive ruling class; but, once he discovered his true heritage as one of the oppressed, he accepted his place among them and answered God's call to deliver his people out of slavery.22 Similarly, Perley enjoys a privileged youth; but, once she is orphaned and subsequently awakened to a distinct likeness between her own limited power (i.e. as an unmarried woman and silent partner) and the powerlessness of factory "hands," she too accepts God's "unsought gift" of responsibility for "these people." The most obvious difference, of course, is that Perley never actually becomes one of the "poor folks," either by discovering a hidden past or by

22See Exodus, chapters 1 through 5, for a more detailed account of Moses' birth and the events leading up to his divine commission.
denying herself all material comforts. In revising even this traditional pattern, however, Phelps suggests that such a levelling of economic means is not necessary to the successful expansion of "Christ's work." "It ain't that there shouldn't be music anywhere," Sip explains in encouraging Perley to keep her "pretty things." "It's only that the music shouldn't ride over the master" (130).

The ways in which Perley most clearly reflects the Mosaic model, then, are both through her conscious, constructive use of personal resources toward more equitable ends, and in her willing determination to stand alongside the working-class poor in order to effect change. Unlike the insulated, elegant, and even amused spectator she had been, for instance, it is now "just like" Perley to suffer "the mud and the rain" together with the factory workers, reports Sip (251). And, "[w]herever people [are] cold, hungry, friendless, desolate, in danger, in despair," Stephen Garrick adds, Perley is there "in God's name" (255). In turn, unlike the idle young woman who was once only remotely aware of her orthodox church membership, Perley now worships in the mill chapel -- sitting "in a row together" with the mill girls -- having left "the best pew-list in Five Falls on the ground that the mill-people do not frequent" the upper-class church (237).

More to the point, certainly, the historical figure of Moses would have been recognized by Phelps' Christian readers not as a god within himself, but as an agent of God through whom God spoke and acted. As recorded in the book of Exodus, for example, when Moses feared that the people would "not believe me, nor hearken my voice," God sent him forth with the promise that "I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say ... and [I] will teach you what you shall do" (Exodus 5: 1, 12, 15). Thus, when Phelps places Perley in a parallel moment, with a clear allusion to the Moses story, she carefully reinforces
the suggestion that Perley is not intended as an object of worship within herself, nor alternately as an agent of oppression, but rather as an instrument through which God speaks, acts, even mediates. Indeed, if Perley were truly acting as an "agent of the voice of oppression," Phelps intimates, she would in fact not speak at all, for to "exhibit some trust or confidence" in the workers by "tell[ing] them why we must reduce their wages" is, according to the male masters of Hayle and Kelso, "an unsuitable position for an employer to take" and "a most uncommon course" (247-48). Acting primarily as an agent of God, and on behalf of the people that she believes God has "thrust upon [her] hands," however, Perley's actual response is quite the opposite -- specifically, to treat the workers "like reasonable beings," and thus to treat them (as at her evenings) as at least spiritual equals. Of course, Perley is still one of the employers when she finally gains her own voice, and she explains "about the trouble that the Company was in" as an apparent representative of the other owners; but, even in doing so, she provides the workers a voice -- and a choice -- of their own as well. Ultimately, after all, the laborers alone will (and do) decide whether or not the mill will remain open, and Perley's honesty allows them to make an informed choice. Given the heightened religious tone of the moment, it seems to be this exchange of mutual trust and respect that Phelps intends to emphasize above all else. While preventing the strike does mean the temporary reduction of wages, she suggests, it also means that the factory will not cease to run entirely, nor its channels of material, intellectual, and religious betterment dry up for lack of (Perley's) resources.

The usefulness and complexity of the Mosaic model do not end here, of course. As the story of Exodus reminds, neither religion nor belief is a set of self-confident answers to be applied to life as it is; rather, faith is a journey through the wilderness towards the
promise of something else that we have only a dim sense of. In the Old Testament narratives, the Israelites' faith in God and hope in a Promised Land are severely tested on a long journey full of disappointments and difficulties. Similarly, in the narrative that Phelps creates, Perley's larger vision of lasting improvement -- of a "Lord's day" that extends beyond the short-lived satisfaction of a single pay day -- points necessarily to a lifetime of effort, with no individual event marking complete success or failure. The manner in which Perley figuratively bridges class differences in the strike scene effectively mirrors the greater balance for which she strives -- namely, the possibility both "to be Hayle and Kelso and yet to pick people out of the mud" (emphasis added 146). But this singular event is only part of the longer journey. For, again like Moses, what Perley seems to recognize overall is that her own ability to help the factory workers is dependent not upon "mere pity" or outright charity, but upon their willingness and ability to help themselves in turn.

As is revealed in a narrative moment such as this, Phelps knows enough to question the assumed boundaries of her own cultural position. And in turn, she sets her readers up for a demanding journey beyond where they themselves are positioned. In her early description of Perley as a descendent of the Pilgrims, for instance, Phelps positioned her in conventional terms as one of "the chosen ones" and thus the American nation as the Promised Land. And yet, in repositioning Perley as a Moses figure, and thus the factory workers as "the chosen" to be delivered from a society of taskmasters, Phelps challenges the traditional notions of a "Christian America." In crafting this Mosaic model, then -- a model

23The Old Testament chronicle of this journey begins in the book of Exodus, continues through the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deutoronomy, and ends with the Israelites' arrival in the Promised Land (after the death of Moses) in the book of Joshua.
which Phelps' critics might assume to be conventional -- Phelps in fact does something quite unconventional. Pushing against the boundaries of her own cultural position, she casts her own middle-class society not as the Promised Land, but rather as the land of the slaveholding Pharoahs. The Promised Land is indeed a state of society towards which to strive, she insists throughout her text, but it exists someplace beyond nineteenth-century cultural boundaries as they have been constructed -- i.e. someplace that mainstream middle-class society is not. In order to rediscover Christ -- and to renew Christianity -- in this world, she thus suggests, individuals alone and society collectively must re-enact the journey.

Bridging the Gulf: Uncommon Ministers of "Christ's Work"

By casting Perley as something of a combined Moses-Christ figure, Phelps references a particular narrative line which would have been familiar to her Christian readers -- a spiritual narrative, specifically, in which the Old Testament Moses prefigures the New Testament Christ, and in which the physical journey to the Promised Land anticipates a spiritual journey that leads ever-closer to a Christ-like state. Within this context, then, the "Christ's work" that Perley undertakes might be understood not as a ministry of traditionally hierarchical design, but rather as a mission (or perhaps even a vision) that invites collective participation. Arguably, Phelps demonstrates this understanding through both the heightened public moment in which the angered workers ask to "hear what the young leddy says" and subsequently enclose Perley in a "circle" with "a sudden tide of respectability" (251), as well as in the more intimate, private moments in which the
working class poor allow Perley to minister quietly beside them "in sick rooms," "in the house of mourning," "by death beds," and "over graves" (255). Most specifically, Phelps demonstrates the reciprocal nature of this work by weaving Perley's life together with Sip's, allowing the two women's paths to converge across "the gulf" (to borrow Phelps' metaphor) that traditionally separates them, and thus suggesting that effective change and lasting reform -- personal, social, spiritual, or otherwise -- are achieved not exclusively from the top down, nor solely from the bottom up (as Davis' Mitchell had concluded), but through the fortified meeting of both in a shared effort.

In the earliest pages of the novel, after all, Perley's initial awakening is triggered largely in part by Sip's stark honesty, and her successive progress throughout the body of the text is often guided by Sip's hard-earned wisdom. In turn, though Sip had long been a caretaker to her own people, she "hadn't anybody" for herself, no "women-folks to cry to," until Perley offers a "quick, strong arm" (189-90); and, as a direct result of Perley's unexpected (and unexpectedly consistent) compassion, Sip too "was more gentle in her judgments of 'that kind of folks' [i.e. "carriage-folks" by her own description] than she used to be" (238). Most importantly, perhaps, just as Perley's immersion in Sip's world prepares her for the "shining" moment of her ministry in the mill yard (to play on Sip's earlier words), so does Sip's exposure to Perley's world (via Perley's "evenings" in particular) ready Sip for her own spiritual destiny. As Perley had once reported to a visiting member of Society at one of her gatherings, for example, "We have nothing so popular ... as [Sip's] readings and recitations. They ring well" (233). And, indeed, though Sip from the beginning had insisted that "I don't set up to be a preacher," this is in fact the role that "falls upon her" (as she describes it) by the novel's end.
Of course, neither Perley nor Sip is singularly responsible for the other's eventual calling; but by casting the two women early on in the biblical-scale pairings of "a saint and a Magdalen, a Lazarus and a Dives," and by later representing each as a prophesying Moses figure who crosses traditional class boundaries, Phelps clearly points to the enormous spiritual significance of their joined purpose in the larger revision of Christianity in nineteenth-century America. This is perhaps no more evident in Phelps' novel than in the events surrounding the symbolically apocalyptic death of Sip's younger sister, Catty. As Phelps' narrator describes her, Catty is "a girl walled up and walled in" from life: she is deaf to all sound except "the noise of the wheels" that "beat about" her mother's head in the factory before Catty was born (96), mute except for the "silent" finger language that only Sip understands (86), and eventually blinded by the "wool-picking" disease and "gaslight-work" of the factory (186). She is, in effect, both a product of the industrial life into which she is born and the embodiment of it.

Thus, when Catty blindly gropes her way to the Five Falls county bridge at the height of a perilous flood, she becomes an openly public symbol of the world which Phelps would change. As the narrator interprets the scene, her tone charged with religious energy, Catty is

Type of the world from which she sprang,—the world of exhausted and corrupted body, of exhausted and corrupted brain, of exhausted and corrupted soul, the world of the laboring poor as man has made it, and as Christ has died for it, of a world deaf, dumb, blind, doomed, stepping confidently to its own destruction before our eyes... (277-78)

Pointedly, this is a moment witnessed by upper and lower classes alike — "a thousand
people" ranging from Maverick Hayle to the "[m]asses of men, women, and children" released from the mills "for high water" — and yet none can do anything to save Catty. The same eyes that watch her now, in fact, were not watching carefully enough to prevent her from reaching the bridge in the first place, and the irreversible consequences of such inattentiveness are clear. "It was too late for dear love to touch her," writes the narrator. "One beck of a human hand would save her; but she could not see it. One cry would turn her; but her eyes were sealed" (emphasis added 277-78). The consequences are the same, Phelps intimates, for an industrial nation that does not look deep enough, nor act effectively enough, to save itself. As with the parable of Lazarus and Dives, she suggests, there will come a time when salvation is no longer within reach.

Significantly, the one person who can recognize and understand Catty's meaning in this climactic moment is Sip. Indeed, though Catty is beyond Sip's physical grasp, and though Catty cannot in turn see Sip, there is clear communication between them. "She's making signs to me," a desperate Sip groans. "[S]he's making signs to call my name!" (278). In the immediate circumstances, of course, Catty's call goes unanswered, for Sip cannot reach her; but here the signs seem of greater importance, as a reminder that neither cries for help nor answers of redress within the world will necessarily come in a recognizable form or readily understood language. Catty, for instance, represents a Christian world — or at least, according to the narrator, a world that "Christ has died for" — so dark and troubled that alternate (and perhaps non-traditional) means of reform and redemption must be sought. This message is certainly evidenced throughout Phelps' novel, particularly in the seemingly unlikely and notably "uncommon" ministries modeled
by both Perley and Sip. If, however, the challenge which Phelps has issued through the example of these two characters has failed to register with her readers by this point in the narrative, the urgency of her final charge cannot be missed.

The account of Catty's death, in fact, is powerfully Christic in both its imagery and magnitude. As Catty stands on the bridge, with "long outstretching hands," for instance, the foundations that had once seemed fixed and sturdy begin to sway. "[T]he solid shore staggered suddenly," writes the narrator. "Then a ragged shadow loomed across the dam. Then there was a shock, and thunder" (278). Within seconds, Catty and the bridge are swept away. The physical explanation for these effects is plain: thousands of feet of timber -- the raw material of industrial labor -- had "broken loose" upstream and cut a destructive path through Five Falls. But Phelps' allusion is more profound. "On the empty ruin of the sliced bridge," continues the narrator, "two logs had caught and hung, black against the color of the water and the color of the sky. They had caught transversely, and hung like a cross" (emphasis added 278). Using language that would no doubt resonate with a Christian audience, Phelps most likely intended here to remind her readers that at the moment of Christ's death, too, the sky reportedly grew dark and the earth shook; and, in turn, her readers would have understood the parallel imagery as a reflection of the enormity of Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of a corrupt world.24 In a moment of treacherous ruin and despair, then, Phelps points to a corresponding hope of rescue. In the seemingly insurpassable "gulf" that separates opposing shores, and in the drowning flood that threatens a man-made world, she suggests, the Christianity of Christ-like sacrifice

24 According to the account of Christ's crucifixion and death in Matthew 27: 45 and 51, "[F]rom the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour ... And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent ..." Similar accounts are given in Luke 23: 44-45 and Mark 15: 33, 38.
emerges as the only enduring means of salvation. Further, she intimates through the clear revelation of the cross, even though so many people who are "professors of religion" (to borrow an earlier label from Sip) are often blind to the signs, Christ is nonetheless revealed continually in present-day death and life, suffering and service.

The fact that Sip can read the signs, of course, marks her as one model of Phelps' hope for the future. From the beginning pages of the novel, certainly, Sip is identified as one of the few who can perceive hidden truths beneath surface appearances; and, in turn, the role she plays in Perley's awakening to some of those truths distinguishes her as a valuable guide and even interpreter of experiences that often defy easy expression. When Sip describes herself, in fact, she reveals that "[s]ometimes ... I seem to think I'm not other folks. Things come to me someways that other folks don't understand nor care for" (288). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that she emerges at the end of the narrative as a preacher-prophet of sorts, having become more indelibly linked by Catty's death to "the great world of signs" into which she believes Catty has passed (279). Indeed, even in the midst of her grieving, Sip is comforted by the belief that "[s]he and Catty could not be parted like two speaking people," and it is her insightful openness to the "grandly eloquent" ways "which Catty could find to speak to her" that eventually leads her to a similar insight and receptivity to the many ways in which God finds to speak as well (278). As Sip explains of her experience:

I'd never cared about [Mission] meetings. I'd never been religious nor good.

But Catty had such things to say! and when I saw the people's faces, lifted up and listening, and when I talked and talked, it all came to me one night like this ...

God had things to say. I'd been talking Catty's words. God had words. I
cannot tell you how it was: but I stood right up and said them; and ever since there's been more than I could say. (292)

Like Perley, who earlier told Maverick that "I have no words to say how these people seem to have been thrust upon my hands," Sip here maintains that "I cannot tell you how it was," for the sudden certainty of having been chosen by God to preach his Word is inexpressible in traditional language. This is a difficult concept in an industrial society focused increasingly on physical material and tangible product, Phelps seems to acknowledge in her characters' attempts at expression; and yet, in such a changing world, she simultaneously suggests, seeing with "the eyes God has given you," and looking deeper for his signs, is that much more important.

Somewhat like Perley, then, Sip unexpectedly discovers herself to be one of the few "feelers" sent out into the dark world "for groping purposes" (though, again like Perley, she more closely resembles a clear-eyed "light-bringer"). And, even though this role is not altogether unforeseen in the context of Phelps' story, it is notably remarkable for the way in which it redefines and revises the Christianity of Sip's nineteenth-century world. As a new "professor of religion," for example, Sip is strikingly different from the traditional middle-class preachers of Protestant Society. She is, after all, female, and "a little rough, brown girl" at that (294); she possesses a "wandering style" of speech that could never be contained by the formally written word (295); and she holds her meetings in such unconventional spaces as "the Irish woman's kitchen," the neighborhood "doorsteps," and even a "miserable" little court that "break[s] out like a wart from one of the foulest alleys in Five Falls" (293). In short, she expands all boundaries of "proper" Protestant practice.
And yet, the narrator writes, there is "a syntax" in Sip's "poor dress and awkward motions," a certain "correctness and perspicuity" about the doorstep that is her pulpit, and "an appeal" to the "muddy little court" where her working-class congregation gathers. "Here on the parlor sofa, in clean cuffs and your slippers," the narrator acknowledges to her reader, "[Sip] harangues you"; but, out in the open air of the little court, she maintains, Sip is "eloquent" (295). Indeed, as with the earliest narrative moments of Phelps' novel in which the coarse and rugged "girl in plaid" appears as an unlikely prophet of "truer words" to Perley's superficially gilded world, here Sip's ministry demonstrates that "God's words" do not exclusively (nor even necessarily) require an outwardly refined, learned scholar or an elegant, imposing church in order to be spoken or heard with great impact. In fact, Sip suggests in the culminating sermon of the novel, it is actually the "pious names" and "pious fights," "books written" and "money spent" in the name of "religion" that repeatedly get in the way of the most genuine "religion of Jesus Christ the Son of God Almighty" (296).

More specifically, Sip directly asserts in her sermon what Phelps has attempted to illustrate more subtly through the lives of her characters: that "religion" in general — and Christianity in particular — is not something that can be quantified or contained or even singularly defined, even (or perhaps especially) in an American nation that strives to identify itself as uniformly "Christian." "I've heard you. You say you're worked and drove and slaved ... and too hot and too cold, and too cross and too poor, to care about religion," Sip says to the factory workers of Five Falls, acknowledging that "religion" has long been considered by them to be a luxury that only the wealthy can afford. "Religion will do for rich folks. That's what you say,—I know. I've said it many times myself," she
continues (295-96). But "religion" and "rich folks' religion" are not necessarily the same, she insists, putting in plain words the novel's overall suggestion that Christianity and traditional middle-class Protestantism are not as synonymous as S/society might expect. "It ain't a rich folks' religion that I've brought to talk to you," Sip promises her listeners (and, through them, Phelps' readers). "Rich religion ain't for you and ain't for me. We're poor folks, and we want a poor folks' religion." And, because Christ was "up, and down, and drove, and slaved ... and poor," too, she concludes, "The religion of Jesus Christ the Son of God Almighty is the only poor folks' religion in all the world" (296).

At first glance, certainly, the (re)vision that Sip offers is troubling in its seemingly separatist, potentially exclusionary implication that "poor folks" (presumably like "rich folks") need a religion that is solely their own. With a closer, more careful look, however, the distinction that Sip attempts to make emerges as something quite different. "[Christ] knows how the world is all a tangle," she says, pointing to the collective whole. And, in turn, she declares, "he knows there'll never be any way but his way to unsnarl us all" (emphasis added 299). "Rich and poor, big or little," she clarifies with an inclusive sweep, everyone is implicated in both the destruction and the salvation of "the world ... as man has made it." The religion that she encourages, then, is not one that either accepts or rejects its members based upon fixed social, cultural, or economic measures, but rather one that differentiates "Christ's way" from the way of man, the way of the land, even the way of the orthodox Protestant church. "Folks may make laws, but laws won't [unsnarl us]," Sip maintains. "Kings and congresses may put their heads together, but they'll have their trouble for nothing. Governments and churches may finger us over, but we'll only snarl the more" (299). The only way for any and all "to get out of our twist," she thus urges, is
"Christ's way" — i.e. "a way that cares more for another world than for this one, and more to be holy than to be happy, and more for other folks than for itself" (300). More to the point, this is a "way" unrestricted by socially constructed lines — a way, for example, that Sip can follow and preach without needing to be more like "rich folks," and a way that Perley can pursue as well without needing to be one of the "poor folks." For all that is required, Sip suggests, is the kind of Christ-like sacrifice that places the larger good above personal comforts; and, even as Perley once described it to Maverick in slightly different terms, the kind of Christ-like sacrifice that places people before profits.

Most significantly, perhaps, the "religion" that Sip presents to her working class peers reflects the same kind of renewed Christianity that Phelps attempts to model throughout the process of Perley's transformation: a Christianity that is not idle but active, not remote but accessible, not static or rigidly fixed but elastic and changing. "Christ's way," in fact, is not something that can be fingered over or owned like a lifeless object, Sip asserts; rather, she suggests, it is as vibrant and variable as each individual within whom it dwells. "O you men and women, and you girls and boys," Sip implores, "look in your own hearts and see what way that is. That way is in the heart. I can't see it. I can't touch it. I can't mark it and line it for you. Look" (299). Certainly, the fact that the Christian "way" which Sip aims to describe here is actually indescribable makes it a difficult concept for both listeners and readers to grasp, maybe even to accept. At the same time, however, such inexpressibility is powerfully suggestive within itself. Indeed, even in her acknowledgment that "Christ's way" cannot be seen, or touched, or easily singled out, Sip indicates a Christianity that is nonetheless present and knowable — more specifically, embodied — in vital human action and living ministry. And, in turn, in her intimation that
"Christ's way" is at once uniquely personal and mysterious, she signals the plurality of Christian ways that can actually combine to represent one way.

In the context of Phelps' story, this is perhaps best demonstrated in the seemingly dissimilar ways in which Perley and Sip enact their divinely commissioned roles. For instance, Perley's life, as the narrator describes it, "had become a service in a temple" (256); and, by novel's end, Perley is nothing short of a saint figure to those who most admire her. With some amount of contrast, the narrator writes of the preaching Sip, "There was nothing saintly about Sip. No halo struck through the little court upon her doorstep" (294); and yet, in "speaking God's words," she apparently (given an ever-increasing number of listeners) satisfies a great spiritual need among the mill workers. As different as they are, then, both Perley and Sip have significant roles within Phelps' expanded vision of Christianity; and both, Phelps further suggests, are necessary to complete that vision. As Perley explains with an extended understanding of the potentially diverse "ways" to follow "Christ's way," for instance, "I undertook to help [Sip's ministry] at first ... but I was only among them; Sip is of them; she understands them and they understand her; so I left her to her work, and I keep to my own" (293).

It might be tempting, given Perley's final description, to argue that the work each woman does is unchangeably separate -- even isolated -- from the other's, and thus that even by the end of Phelps' novel they still resemble "a saint and a Magdalen" who may "struggle towards each other," but who are ultimately "vain builders of a vain bridge across the fixed gulf of an irreparable lot." Certainly, however, Phelps herself would argue that...
the distinct yet common ministries performed by Perley and Sip combine to represent the very "Christian ingenuity" which she originally sought in her nineteenth-century world. Perley and Sip are undeniably different, she acknowledges throughout her novel; and each approaches "Christ's work" with different personal resources. Still, as two young women who, with new consciousness and the confidence of divine authorization, effectively challenge, expand, and revise traditional social-spiritual assumptions, Phelps' story suggests, Perley and Sip also proceed together along a similarly "pure," "good," and "true" Christian way (to borrow Sip's words).

At no point, certainly, does Phelps suggest that their shared progress is easy. Indeed, the two women's gradually shifting roles throughout The Silent Partner might be described in the same terms as an earlier scene between Sip and Catty, in which Sip attempts to explain to Catty -- with the "unreal, soundless words" of her hands -- why Catty's sight is failing. In that moment, the narrator writes, "One might have thought, to see them, how the mystery of suffering and the mystery of love grope and tremble forever after one another, with no speech nor language but a sign" (191). "Christ's way" is often a mystery, Phelps here reminds her readers, a seemingly uneven journey along which both suffering and love necessarily (if uneasily) coexist, and along which mere words or Christian "professions" are not always enough. Nonetheless, she illustrates, it is manifested in countless (and often "soundless") ways. And thus, even in one of her earliest portrayals of Perley and Sip, Phelps offers her own sign of hope for lasting progress despite the world's obstacles. When Perley and Sip meet for only the second time, in Five Falls, the narrator notes, they are walking singularly along a "narrow path" (43). As a result of their fateful encounter, however, they return along an "ever-widening
path, side by side" (46). Notably, the two walk "slowly and more slowly" as they proceed, and the path they now tread together is "slippery"; but at the same time, the narrator writes -- with words that at once anticipate the novel's end and reflect Phelps' vision of an inclusive, collective Christian way -- the shared path is also a "shining ... broadening way" (48).
CHAPTER 4

"THE CHRISM OF A NEW ERA": THE MINGLING OF BELIEF IN FRANCES E. W. HARPER'S IOLA LEROY

As recently as 1980, Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) was considered by most American literary scholars to be the first novel published by an African American woman in the United States.¹ A lot has happened since then. The rediscovery and reprinting of Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) in 1983 revealed that Wilson, not Harper, was most likely the first black woman to publish a novel in the United States.² And the rediscovery and reprinting of three additional novels by Harper in 1994 -- *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), *Sowing and Reaping* (1876-77), and *Trial and Triumph* (1888-89) -- revealed that *Iola Leroy* was not even Harper's first novel. It was with the first of these discoveries, writes Frances Smith Foster, that "scholars began to consider seriously the possibility that our information about the African American novelistic tradition may have been based upon inadequate data," and with the latter that "much of our received knowledge about African American literature and culture" was contradicted (*Minnie's Sacrifice* xviii, xix). Still, the outcome, she maintains, is that "[o]ur knowledge of African American literature has increased dramatically" (*Minnie's Sacrifice* xviii).

² According to his Introduction to Wilson's book, Henry Louis Gates considers Wilson not only the first African American woman, but the first African American, to publish in the United States. The earliest-known African American novels published before *Our Nig* include William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (London 1853); Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (London 1857); and Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or The Huts of America* (partially serialized 1859; fully serialized 1861-62).
For Harper alone, this renewed interest in and revised knowledge of both black American literary history and black women's literary history has meant increased literary attention. Indeed, as Paul Lauter notes, "The late 1980s [were] good to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper" (27). In 1987, Beacon Press restored *Iola Leroy* to print; and in 1988, the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers published editions of both *Iola Leroy* and Harper's *Complete Poems*.3 The 1990s have seen a continuation of this interest. In 1990, The Feminist Press issued a collection of Harper's letters, poetry, essays, speeches, and short fiction; and in 1994, Beacon Press collected and reprinted for the first time Harper's three serialized novels.4 Today, Harper's writings are included in at least one major anthology of American literature; and, as Foster maintains, *Iola Leroy* itself is now considered "a 'classic' among African American novels" (*Oxford Companion* 343).5

For a writer who was "enormously popular with nineteenth-century readers" (Foster, *Brighter* 26), and for a novel -- *Iola Leroy* -- that was "probably the best-selling novel by an Afro-American writer prior to the twentieth century" (Foster, *Iola Leroy* xxvii), such increased contemporary attention is notably deserving. And yet, as scholars like Lauter and Foster suggest, the critical neglect of Harper for most of the twentieth century is equally

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notable. Even as he "celebrate[d]" in a 1988 article "the uplifting of the shadows that have hidden Harper -- and what she represents -- from us and our students," for example, Lauter bemoaned the still "wide scholarly inattention to Harper" and challenged the academic standards or "institutional arrangements" that had "at the very least, obscured her" (28).

Writing in 1990, Foster too noted with optimism the changing "critical tide" that had begun to reevaluate Harper's achievement as a "significant literary force," but at the same time she pointed to "the general neglect and misreadings" of literature by women like Harper that had dimmed that achievement for so long (Brighter 26, 23).6

For the most part, these concerns are reflected in contemporary Harper scholarship to date, much of which is devoted to establishing Harper's place (and thus her importance) within the broader traditions of African American and women's literature and to identifying the significance of her work within the larger cultural contexts of race, gender, and class. Across the spectrum of literary history, Harper has been carefully positioned as both descendant and foremother. As a novelist, for example, Harper has been studied against both the black male authors (such as William Wells Brown) and the popular white women novelists who preceded her.7 And in turn, as a poet and short story writer, she has been identified as a literary influence to black writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt.8 At the same time, the social and political relevance of Harper's work has been drawn on repeatedly as evidence of her significance as both a literary and historical figure. Indeed, Harper's role as a prominent lecturer, essayist, and activist (for abolition, women's rights, temperance) has often been acknowledged by contemporary American

6For a useful summary of the early-to-mid twentieth-century critical reception of Iola Leroy, see also Foster, Introduction, Iola Leroy.
8See Foster, Brighter 4, and "Gender, Genre and Vulgar Secularism" 48; Ammons 61-62.
scholars as the key to her importance as a nineteenth-century writer to be studied.9

Clearly, the critical attention that has been given to Harper since the late 1980s has been designed to restore what Elizabeth Ammons has called Harper's "preeminent" place in literary history (61). But now that much of this work has been done, it is time to rediscover Frances Harper yet again, and to face the challenge of how to read a novel like *Iola Leroy*. Identifying a general "distinction between matter and manner [that] has long characterized evaluations of African American literature," for example, John Ernest argues that "*Iola Leroy* has often been valued less as a literary work than a historical document." And, "barely distinguishable from such evaluations," he continues, "are those that praise the novel for 'major themes' (more precisely, the historical, cultural, and political issues) it addresses, often regardless of Harper's manner of address" ("From Mysteries to Histories" 498).10 Frances Foster, too, criticizes "[t]he faint praise that slights Frances Harper's artistic contributions but extols her good intentions" ("Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism" 48). As Foster maintains, there is more than racial or gender bias at work in shaping attitudes about Harper's writing; what she finds more interesting, in fact, is "the bias of academics towards Frances Harper's chosen genre" of popular literature and the choice she made in turn to publish much of her work in the official journals of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church. "In the mid-nineteenth century, this was not as problematic as it is today," Foster accurately notes, given that "religion and politics and art and science were not the rigidly separated disciplines that we would have them be today."

But, "[s]ince the turn of the century," she adds, "literary critics and scholars have been

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9See Lauter 28; Foster, Introduction, *Iola Leroy*.
10See also Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation* 181.
embarrassed, offended, or perhaps merely disconcerted by literature that is unabashedly sentimental, religious, or didactic" ("Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism" 49).

In returning to and reevaluating a novel like *Iola Leroy*, then, scholars have a (re)new(ed) responsibility to consider more fully the aesthetic attitudes, literary purposes, and belief systems of the nineteenth century in particular, and of nineteenth-century black writers more specifically. For Foster, this means recognizing that Frances Harper and her literary contemporaries "believed that good art must be functional," that "[i]t must serve to educate, inspire, and correct the people," and therefore that their own literature "was intended to stir people to action and to apply its precepts to their daily lives" ("Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism" 54). For Barbara Christian, in turn, this also means recognizing the incompatibility between such literature and a contemporary twentieth-century literary criticism that creates a false separation of art from life, or even of life from art. Indeed, for Christian, "the literature of black people, and of women," in particular, demands not a "fixed" theory or singular method of criticism, but rather an approach that responds to the dynamic nature of the writing itself. In arguing that "people of color have always theorized — but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic," in fact, she writes that "I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking" ("Race for Theory" 349). As a result, she concludes, she herself has "no set method ... since for me every work suggests a new approach. As risky as that might seem, it is, I believe, what intelligence means — a tuned sensitivity to that which is alive and therefore cannot be known until it is known" ("Race for Theory" 358). A close study
of Jarena Lee's spiritual autobiography along these lines reveals that "that which is alive" both in the production and the reception of Lee's work is the dynamic positioning force of belief -- a belief, importantly, that is "known" only through its embodiment in both writer and text. In similar terms, reading Harper's *Iola Leroy* anew reveals a narrative that is not merely a literary or historical "artifact" (to use Foster's term), but rather a narrative designed to transform individual, familial, and even national identities -- both within and outside of the text -- through the active intersections of art, life, feeling, knowledge, and belief.

As a novel positioned at the crossroads of historical change (from slavery, through war, to Reconstruction), and thus immersed in a web of shifting religious beliefs, generational values, racial identities and gender roles, in fact, *Iola Leroy* does not pretend to offer a single direction of transformation for its nineteenth-century readership; instead, it provides a strikingly varied and wide-ranging portrait of possible combinations of beliefs and practices, many of which might be expected to clash. From the beginning of Harper's narrative, for example, the "ole time religion" of slavery founded in patience and prayer is seemingly positioned against a "new" youthful crusade intent on fighting for God-given rights; and the visions, intuition, and "child-like faith" representative of the black "folk" are seemingly at odds with a new generation of "knowledge" gained from the written word and formal study. Within the scope of the novel's design, however, Harper demonstrates the ways in which such seemingly incompatible means of responding to the "battles of life" necessarily "mingle" (to use Harper's word) to ensure both change and recovery. And she places at the center of this convergence an increased sense of duty to the covenant of
the Christian Gospel. Indeed, if slavery was "a fearful cancer eating into the nation's heart," and war was "the dreadful surgery by which the disease was eradicated," Iola muses with Dr. Gresham, then the "one remedy by which our nation can recover," she concludes, is "[a] fuller comprehension of the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and their application to our national life" (216). As Harper's text illustrates, this "fuller comprehension" is molded by a common "crucible" of pain and suffering; thus, the author ultimately suggests, the genuine healing and transformation of individuals and communities alike can only be achieved through the unity -- in essence, the fusion -- of old and young, spiritual and physical, prayer and action, faith and experience.

Active Faith: The Convergence of Religion, Activism, Literature, and Life

Writing in 1987 (and therefore some years before the rediscovery of Harper's three earlier novels), Hazel Carby identified Iola Leroy as "the culmination" of Frances Harper's career. Indeed, defending what was then believed to be Harper's only novel, written at the age of 67, Carby argued that "far from being an aberrant event in an otherwise successful life, the production of Iola Leroy was rooted in the authority of Harper's experience as abolitionist, lecturer, poet, teacher, feminist, and black woman" (63). More to the point, perhaps, Carby sought to dislodge what she saw as a commonly held belief in "the dichotomy" between Harper's activism and her literature, and in turn to demonstrate that "Harper lived the intellectual activity that she embodied in her fictional world" (86-87).  

In more recent years, several scholars have highlighted such "melding of life and works"

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1 Carby here is responding most directly to Barbara Christian, who argues that Iola Leroy "does not contain much of the realistic experiences Harper herself describes in her articles about the lives of black women of the time" (Black Women Novelists 4). For a brief review of nineteenth-century critics who also "subordinated" Harper's literary achievements to her social activism, see Foster, Brighter 26-27.
(Foster, *Brighter* 26) as among the most significant aspects of Harper's career. Melba Boyd, for example, refers to Harper singularly as "artist-activist" and points to "the intersection of [Harper's] poetry with her political and cultural stature as an abolitionist and as a feminist" (*Discarded Legacy* 11). Elizabeth Ammons, too, maintains that "[t]he signal feature of Harper's life and work ... was her combined commitment to action and art" (64). With this in mind, then, a close reading of Harper's final and most famous novel is not complete without a fuller sense of the life and experience in which the novel's writing was "rooted."

Most notably, Frances Harper's own life spanned the same historical spectrum as that represented in *Iola Leroy*, from the antebellum period through post-Reconstruction. And in turn, the concerns to which Harper dedicated her full time and energy -- from antislavery and black civil rights to women's rights and temperance -- are those most forcefully addressed in the novel. Harper herself was born free in the slave state of Maryland on September 24, 1825. An only child, she was orphaned at a young age and subsequently raised by her uncle, the Reverend William Watkins, founder of the Academy for Negro Youth in Baltimore. As a student at the academy, notes Frances Smith Foster, Harper would have received "rigorous training in a classical curriculum of languages, biblical studies and elocution" (*Oxford Companion* 342), with additional emphasis on Christian service and social leadership (*Brighter* 7) -- a foundation that clearly informed her professional life as writer and activist. Indeed, from the time she left the academy at age 13, until her death at age 87, Harper lived a varied and accomplished life centered on a convergence of literature and social reform. As early as 1845, reports her friend and first
biographer, William Still, Harper published her first book, *Forest Leaves*;\(^{12}\) and though no known copies of that volume exist, Foster speculates that it was probably, like many of Harper's subsequent books, "a collection of poetry and prose on a variety of subjects including religious values, women's rights, social reform, Biblical history, and current events" (*Brighter* 8). Over the course of more than 50 years, Harper published at least eight volumes of poetry, four novels, and countless essays, journal articles, and speeches. Notably, this work went hand-in-hand with Harper's reform activities. In 1854, Harper was the first black woman to be employed as a traveling lecturer by the Maine Anti-Slavery Society (*Foster, Brighter* 11); and from that point through the end of the Civil War, she traveled extensively, gaining national prominence as both a public speaker and writer. After the war, Harper expanded her reform activities to include a variety of social concerns. She "devoted herself to the work of Reconstruction" and "argue[d] forcefully for the welfare of the newly freed slaves" (*Foster, Brighter* 19, 20); and in turn, she became "one of the best-known African American women participants" in the women's rights movement (*Collier-Thomas, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper"* 49), aligning herself with such organizations as the Association for the Advancement of Women, the American Woman Suffrage Association, and the National Association of Colored Women.

As these select biographical details reveal, much work has been done within the last dozen years to recover a more complete portrait of Frances Harper; and much of that work, accurately enough, has focused predominantly on Harper's commitment to her own African American race and to women in particular. What a closer look at Harper's life reveals, however, is a central, unifying thread that shaped her work as a whole: namely, the

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\(^{12}\) For Still's 1871 biographical sketch of Harper, see *The Underground Railroad* 755-80.
commitment to a uniquely Christian form of service in art and activism alike. As Harper herself wrote in an early essay simply titled "Christianity": "Christianity is a system claiming God as its author, and the welfare of man for its object." And to this system, she continued, all other human pursuits -- philosophy, science, literature, music, learning -- must "bend" in order to gain wisdom, knowledge, and strength (96).13 Almost without exception, Harper's life and work continuously intersected with religious concerns and church activity. As a child and student, she was influenced by her guardian uncle, William Watkins, "a fervent abolitionist, a community leader, and a highly regarded teacher" whose "evangelistic efforts extended beyond the confines of any particular denomination" (Foster, Brighter 7).14 As a teacher, she was the first woman to be employed by the Union Seminary, an A.M.E. church school near Columbus, Ohio.15 As an abolitionist, she pledged herself to the antislavery cause with an "abiding faith," notes William Still, writing to him of her decision, "It may be that God himself has written upon both my heart and brain a commission to use time, talent and energy in the cause of freedom" (qtd. in Still, The Underground Railroad 758). Later, as a social missionary of sorts to black

13 As Foster notes, "Christianity" was first published in 1853 in the Christian Recorder. It was reprinted in both the Provincial Freeman and Frederick Douglass' Paper, and several parts were quoted in William C. Nell's Colored Portraits of the American Revolution (1855). Harper herself included the essay in the 1854 editions of her Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects, and in all subsequent editions of that volume. Thus, Foster writes, "This essay helped establish Frances Harper's national reputation" (Brighter 95). Several years later, in his biographical sketch of Harper in The Underground Railroad, William Still also singled out this essay as a significant early prose piece, quoting an extensive portion of it.

14 Collier-Thomas indicates that Watkins was a United Methodist minister ("Frances Ellen Watkins Harper" 44); however, Foster notes that in 1844 Watkins became a Seventh-Day Adventist, though "he was a frequent and effective speaker at five of the local Methodist churches." In fact, she writes, "So well regarded was his lifetime of service to the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) that upon his death the African Methodist Episcopal Church Review published two articles and called for an endowed chair in his name at one of the A.M.E. colleges" (Brighter 7).

15 Union Seminary was the precursor to Wilberforce College, "the first institution of higher learning to be established by African Americans in the United States" (Collier-Thomas, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper" 44).
Americans and women, she organized Sunday schools, worked as Assistant Superintendent for the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.), and was "one of the very few African-American women able to gain some measure of acceptance" in, among other organizations, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (Foster, *Brighter* 20, 21). And throughout, as a writer, Harper continued to publish regularly in the religious press, contributing frequently to such periodicals as *The African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* and the *Christian Recorder*, the official organ of the A.M.E. church.

Although, as suggested above, Harper's writing and service were most frequently associated with the A.M.E. church, and although she would eventually be "listed in *The Heroines of African Methodism* and cited by the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review* as a "Woman of Our Race Worthy of Imitation"" (Foster, *Minnie's Sacrifice* xiv), Harper was herself a convert to Unitarianism; and, in this respect, her own life work reflected that of her uncle, extending beyond the boundaries of any singular church denomination. In many ways, this entwining of faith groups would have been in line with the central principles of Unitarian thought in the nineteenth century. As a church founded upon tolerance and human dignity, for example, American Unitarianism grew gradually out of a resistance to orthodox doctrines that fostered exclusion, prejudice, and sectarianism.

Defining what he believed to be the true church, in a now famous 1819 Baltimore sermon

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16 In fact, notes Foster, "Harper was the only African American woman to be awarded a day on the Red Letter Calendar of the Women's [sic] Christian Temperance Union" (*Minnie's Sacrifice* xiv).

17 As Foster notes, "Frances Harper was one of very few African Americans who published regularly in both the religious press and the secular press, in venues read largely by blacks and in venues read primarily by whites" (*Minnie's Sacrifice* xv). For more on Harper's work in the A.M.E. press in particular, see Foster, "Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism."
that became the platform of Unitarian Christianity in the United States, Boston clergyman William Ellery Channing stated:

By his Church our Savior does not mean a party bearing the name of a human leader, distinguished by a form or an opinion, and on the ground of this distinction, denying the name and character of Christians to all but themselves ...

These are the church — men made better, made holy, virtuous by his religion — men who, hoping in his promises, keep his commands.18

As reflected in much of Frances Harper's work, and in Iola Leroy in particular, nineteenth-century American Unitarianism — organized in 1825 as the American Unitarian Association, and in 1865 as the National Conference of Unitarian Churches — promoted "Deeds not creeds" (Willis 413). Advocates of a liberal Christianity, for instance, Unitarians rejected (among others) the orthodox Calvinist doctrines of human depravity and election by grace, embracing instead a belief in "the perfectability of human character" and "the ultimate salvation of all souls" (Mead 232). Along these lines, writes religious historian Henry Warner Bowden, human nature was considered "basically the same as God's ... and the moral grandeur of Jesus indicated how men might follow ethical ideals to perfect themselves while aiding the general progress of society" (Dictionary of American Religious Biography 94).19

18From "Unitarian Christianity; Discourse at the Ordination of the Rev. Jared Sparks, Baltimore, 1819," by William Ellery Channing. Quoted in Frank S. Mead, Handbook of Denominations in the United States, 7th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990) 231. Notably, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' grandfather, Moses Stuart, was one of the most powerful defenders of orthodoxy at Andover Seminary, and would have been one of the original respondent-opponents to Channing's 1819 "Unitarian Christianity" sermon. (See Ahlstrom 396).

19This reflects one of the primary beliefs that distinguishes Unitarians from so-called "Trinitarians" — i.e. those Protestant and Catholic Christians who believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine by which God is understood as three distinct persons in one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Specifically, Unitarians believe in the oneness or unipersonality of God — i.e. that there is no distinction of persons in
More to the point, perhaps, Unitarians encouraged belief in a kind of living faith—a Christianity learned not through blind acceptance of church dogma, but through direct experience and suffering "at the foot of the cross" (as Harper herself describes it, *Iola Leroy* 107). As religious historian J. R. Willis writes of American Unitarianism in the mid-to-late nineteenth century especially, "Belief in the dignity of man, in the validity of the democratic processes, and in the oneness of the human family, as well as sensitivity to suffering and beauty, were seen to be a truer witness of religious growth than theological orthodoxy" (414). With this in mind, it is perhaps not difficult to imagine the appeal that Unitarianism must have held for Frances Harper. In line with Harper's own concerns, the church centered its attention "less on doctrinal questions than on the application of Christianity to personal and social life, political reform, philanthropy and education" (emphasis added, Wilbur 803). And to this end, nineteenth-century Unitarian leaders like Channing and, later, Theodore Parker, became prominent defenders of various social reforms. Channing, for example, promoted prison reform and temperance; and, in 1835, at the cost of friends and support, he published an antislavery volume titled simply *Slavery* (Godbey 202). Parker, too, advocated prison reform and temperance, as well as education for women, and he became a leader in Boston of the abolitionist movement. Reportedly, in fact, he participated in the rescue of fugitive slaves and "served as a secret backer of John Brown, approving of his plans for insurrection" (Bowden, *Dictionary of American Religious Biography* 354). These facts alone would align Parker with Harper, who was herself a participant in the Underground Railroad and a friend and supporter of John God. Along these lines, then, they believe in "the strict humanity of Jesus, although all persons, as children of God, are divine" (Mead 232).
Brown. But more importantly, perhaps, they reflect the convergence of religion and activism in Unitarianism itself that so clearly informed Harper's own life and work.\textsuperscript{20}

The A.M.E. church with which Harper often affiliated herself was, in turn, an influential source of reform activity in the nineteenth century. As evidenced in Jarena Lee's early autobiographical account, in fact, Methodists believed that "conversion brought the converted into close association with God," and subsequently that "it was the duty of the saved to bring God's word to the unredeemed" (Walker 1). For a black woman evangelist like Lee, in the earliest days of the A.M.E. church, this meant embodying and actively preaching the spiritual worth (indeed, the spiritual equality) of all people that Methodism proclaimed. For later A.M.E. clergy and missionaries, facing the increased racial and political tensions of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, this meant as well an active involvement in the social and economic uplift of the black race. As religious historian Clarence Walker writes, "A sense of mission set the A.M.E. Church off from other groups of black Christians. The clergy and laity of the church saw themselves as the agents of God for the task of elevating the Negro race in America" (15-16). This central belief, suggests Walker, enabled black Methodists "to connect their temporal and spiritual lives to the civil order" (2); and the result was a church that (to borrow again from Harper) "mingled" spiritual needs and social concerns, the promise of salvation and an improved position in American society.

As Walker compellingly maintains, the A.M.E.'s "tradition of public service" and

\textsuperscript{20}It bears noting here that Beacon Press, which restored \textit{Iola Leroy} and Harper's three earlier novels to print, was established by the American Unitarian Association in 1902. In recent years, the Unitarian Universalist Association (merged in 1961) has continued its involvement in social concerns which Harper herself supported: e.g. the issue of black power; the rise of feminist consciousness; inner-city ministries; the development of lay religious life. (See Mead 233).
"philosophy of self-help" had their origins in the ideas of Richard Allen and his fellow church founders. "The emphasis which these men placed on self-help grew out of their awareness of the plight of the free Negro in antebellum northern society," writes Walker. "Cut off from most social services, free blacks needed an institution that would serve as a center for community life; where they could worship, meet socially, and educate their children. Such a place was provided for free blacks by the A.M.E. Church and it served as the fixed point from which church members drew their strength" (13). In the years preceding the Civil War, this church role extended to include the concerns of enslaved blacks as well. As noted in Chapter 1, at its inception the A.M.E. church distinguished itself from the white Methodist Episcopal church by taking a unified antislavery stance, banning slaveholders from membership. In Philadelphia, "[t]he [A.M.E.'s] Bethel Church basement and the Allen home sheltered fugitive slaves en route to points further north" (Raboteau, Fire in the Bones100). And in Harper's native city of Baltimore, Daniel Coker's A.M.E. Bethel Church -- second in size only to "Mother Bethel" in Philadelphia -- slaves both within the city and in the surrounding rural areas "were included in the church's care" (Raboteau, Slave Religion 204). During the war, members and clergy of the A.M.E. church enlisted and served in the Union army; and in turn, both during the war and in the years immediately following, the A.M.E. church was "the first black religious institution to send missionaries south" (Walker 4).

Throughout, in serving both the free blacks of the antebellum North and the slaves and freedmen of the South, the church insisted that "[r]acial progress depended upon moral reform and education" (Raboteau, Fire in the Bones 96). To this end, writes religious historian Albert J. Raboteau of the church's fundamental ethic, "It was not enough to
merely refrain from debauchery, folly, and idleness. It was not enough to provide for one's family. True Christians had to stretch out their hands beyond the circle of family and friends to comfort the poorer neighbor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan" (*Fire in the Bones* 96). In the earliest years of the church, such goals of racial uplift and moral reform took shape in the forms of the Bethel Benevolent Society and the African Society for the Education of Youth (Raboteau, *Fire in the Bones* 96). And throughout the nineteenth century, the A.M.E. church continued to establish institutions to care for what A.M.E. Bishop Daniel Payne described as "the moral and religious as well as the intellectual culture" of black Americans (qtd. in Williams 50). As early as 1817, for example, the church created the A.M.E. Book Concern, perhaps the first publishing organization created by African Americans (Foster, "Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism" 52), designed to provide A.M.E. church members with both religious and educational materials. And by mid-century, the church had created the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Magazine*, the *Repository of Religion and Literature and of Science and Art*, the *Christian Recorder*, and the *A.M.E. Church Review* (Foster, "Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism" 52). In turn, the church established schools to provide the "uplift" of children and adults alike. "By 1886," reports church historian Gilbert Williams, "the A.M.E. Church owned and operated 11 colleges and normal schools with more than 2,000 students ... [and] operated Sunday schools that, by the end of 1885, were serving some 200,000 children" (49). As Williams carefully notes, these schools provided more than religious instruction alone; "they also helped young and old to read, speak, and understand facts and ideas of a secular nature" (49). Overall, Walker maintains, through its individual
churches, its press, and its schools, the A.M.E. church "inculcated its members with a sense of mission" at once religious and social (15). And indeed, adds Raboteau, "As a center for social organization, economic cooperation, educational endeavor, leadership training, political articulation, and religious life, the A.M.E. Church exercised unrivaled influence in many black communities" for most of the nineteenth century (Fire in the Bones 79).

Among the most important vehicles for extending the church's influence nationwide was the Christian Recorder: the official newspaper of the A.M.E. church since 1852; "at certain periods, the largest black newspaper in this country" (Foster, "Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism" 52); and, perhaps most notably, the paper in which Harper published her first three novels. As Foster notes, the Recorder "was not intended as a mere vehicle for church business or theology"; rather, she writes, "Its assumption of an international readership and a multiple mission was reflected in its masthead, which for many years proclaimed: 'The Christian Recorder, Published by the African Methodist Episcopal church in the United States, for the Dissemination of Religion, Morality, Literature and Science'" ("Gender, Genre, and Vulgar Secularism" 52). This broad and "multiple" purpose no doubt appealed to Frances Harper, who in addition to her early novels contributed numerous poems and prose pieces to the paper between 1853 and 1911. And indeed, as Williams indicates in his book-length study of the paper from 1854 to 1902, the Recorder addressed many of the intersecting political, intellectual, social, and religious concerns most central to a nineteenth-century black writer-activist like Harper. In fact, writes Williams, "When the Recorder made its mid-century debut in July 1852, the

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21To this day, notably, the Christian Recorder remains "the oldest continuously published black newspaper in the United States" (Williams 12).
newspaper expressed both its religious views and its consciousness-raising ideology" (15). Included in the paper's pages, for example, were articles and editorials about "education, equal access to public accommodations, progress or the lack thereof in politics, and suffrage," as well as "news about women and families" (Williams 15).

In the years following the Civil War and Reconstruction, in particular, the Recorder both shaped and articulated African Americans' concerns about civil rights. The paper printed readers' accounts of "racial harassment" and lynchings (Williams 39), reported "legal victories and defeats in racial discrimination cases" (Williams 37), and in general "challenged Jim Crow legislation and other attempts to deny black[s] equal participation in American society" (Williams 47). In turn, articles, editorials, and letters to the Recorder "urged all blacks to get an education," often "connect[ing] education with emancipation and freedom" (Williams 51). As Williams explains, "the A.M.E. Church endeavored to educate blacks with the singular purpose of preparing them to participate successfully in American society at all levels" (51). Finally, the Recorder "actively encouraged black unity by advocating ideas such as family and community" (Williams 127). Specifically, notes Williams, "unlike most newspapers of the period, the Recorder reported and editorialized on issues affecting women, particularly women's positions in and contributions to the A.M.E. Church" (103-4); and, in an effort to unite black families separated by slavery and war, the paper ran for its readers an "Information Wanted" section from 1863 through the early twentieth century.

In terms of both its broad social concerns and its more specific religious activism, this was the culture in which Frances Harper lived, worked, and wrote; and in turn, this was
the culture that she represented most comprehensively in *Iola Leroy*. Here, as embodied both in Harper's experience and her text, religious institutions like the Unitarian and A.M.E. churches extended their considerable influence to both shape and serve a linked social-spiritual agenda; church leaders and Christian lay people alike took on roles at once spiritual and secular, attending to the simultaneous uplift of souls, minds, and socio-economic positions; and literature assumed the cultural work of effecting both moral and social reform. In this context, in particular, the years-long crusade for abolition was aligned with spiritual emancipation, the battle for civil rights was informed by belief in spiritual equality, and the movement for racial unity and advancement was cast in the light of divine justice and deliverance. As a writer-activist, Harper was clearly shaped by this culture, as much as she sought to shape it in turn. Of her own "mission" in writing *Iola Leroy*, in fact, she proclaimed: "From threads of fact and fiction I have woven a story whose mission will not be in vain if it awaken in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christlike humanity" (*Iola Leroy* 282). In this respect, Harper's final novel might indeed be considered "the culmination" of her career, as Hazel Carby maintains; or, as William Still put it in 1892, this "last effort" of Harper's might well be "the crowning effort of her long and valuable services in the cause of humanity" (Introduction 3).

"Room for young as well as old": Representations of Religious Experience

At once anticipating and reflecting a central concern of her life's work -- and of "the crowning effort" of that work, in particular -- Harper wrote in "Our Greatest Want," an 1859 essay directed at black readers specifically:
Leading ideas impress themselves upon communities and countries. A thought is evolved and thrown out among the masses, they receive it and it becomes interwoven with their mental and moral life -- if the thought be good the receivers are benefited, and helped onward to the truer life; if it is not, the reception of the idea is a detriment (102-103).

At the moments of most significant political and social transition within which Harper locates *Iola Leroy* -- Civil War, emancipation, Reconstruction -- this point was especially salient. Indeed, within the context of shifting identities (individual, communal, and national alike), African Americans were in the position of either being assigned a (new) cultural identity, or creating one of their own; and this, in turn, gave rise to debates among African Americans about what path(s) would best ensure their collective social-spiritual liberation and uplift. As reflected in Jarena Lee's earlier narrative, for example, the A.M.E. church -- a center for black community life -- was often divided over the most effective means of worship and ministry. Some (like Lee) saw in the embodied "sinking down" or "crying out" of an ecstatic moment the most genuine evidence of God's Spirit, and thus located the authority to preach in an inspired knowledge of the divine; others (like A.M.E. Bishop Daniel Payne) saw displays of religious fervor as counterproductive to the cause of racial respectability and progress, and thus insisted upon more "rational" and culturally "legitimate" theological instruction for clergy. These theological debates were linked to political concerns as well. In deliberating about the role of black men in the national conflict of Civil War, for example, some A.M.E. church members saw the war as a political battle between (white) North and South alone, and so encouraged black Americans
only "to pray to 'Almighty God, for his mercy and holy wisdom" (Christian Recorder, qtd. in Walker 32); others saw the war as a struggle against slavery, and thus insisted that "there never would be 'any peace in this country until the black man [had] a hand and a say-so in the bringing about of peace'" by serving in the Union army (Christian Recorder, qtd. in Walker 37-38). In the years following the war, the debates continued, bringing concerns of both moral and social reform to bear on issues like African emigration, education, and material progress. In virtually every sphere of African American life, in fact, one question predominated: What is the story we shall tell about ourselves?

This same question is at the center of Iola Leroy as well; but for Harper, the question itself was more complex. Who shall tell the story, she asked in turn, and on what authority? As some twentieth-century commentators on the novel have noted, for instance, Harper includes in Iola Leroy two distinct communities among African Americans: those who represent the old ways -- what might be called the "folk" -- and those who represent a learned new generation -- what might be labelled the "talented tenth" (to use DuBois' term). Indeed, one early twentieth-century scholar even went so far as to argue that with Iola Leroy, Harper "helped to establish the precedent of developing well-mannered, educated colored characters to offset the stock figures of the plantation tradition" (Gloster, qtd. in Foster, Iola Leroy xxxvi). And yet, as a careful reading of Iola Leroy reveals, Harper was not interested in such binary distinctions, especially in the sense of one community being set off from (or somehow compensating for) the other. Rather, she was interested in representations of experience, and thus maintained (as does one of her older characters) that "in the conflict for the right there's room for young as well as old" (Iola Leroy 251). More specifically, Harper saw in the differences between "old" and "young" two distinct
understandings of the nature of belief, two distinct positions of faith. And for her, to lose
one or the other -- or, perhaps more accurately, to lose one to the other -- would undercut
the vital development of African American community. Undoubtedly, Harper recognized in
the African American debates of her time the desire to create an established, formal code of
racial integrity, self-government, and authority; at the same time, however, she identified
the inherent risk therein of undermining or even erasing the complex culture of experience
that also informed constructions of identity. In seeking to reshape the "leading ideas" of her
nineteenth-century society, in fact, Harper maintained that "our greatest wants ... strike
deeper than any want that gold or knowledge can supply." Instead, she argued, "We want
more soul, a higher cultivation of all our spiritual faculties" ("Our Greatest Want" 103).
This becomes the tension at the heart of Iola Leroy as well: specifically, to acknowledge
the new needs of (and indeed, a "new era" for) African Americans in a time of significant
national transition, but in a way that does not ignore or forget the active role of faith -- and
the faithful -- throughout.

From the earliest pages of Iola Leroy, the transition and potential conflict between
what has been "dese many years" (in slavery) and what is to come in the years ahead (in
war and freedom) is perhaps most clearly represented in the ongoing dialogue between
"folk" characters like Uncle Daniel and Aunt Katie, and restless young slaves like Robert
Johnson and Tom Anderson. Described as a man "with a look of saintly patience on his
face" (16), with a wife (Aunt Katie) whose face too is "saintly and calm" (28), Uncle
Daniel is the dignified -- if uneducated -- spiritual leader of his slave community whose
means of applying Christian "claims" to his life have most often taken the shape of "prayin'
and hopin' " for freedom (18). But his Christian ethics reach beyond the boundaries of self and slavery as well. When confronted with a choice between escaping to freedom via the Union army or remaining true to a promise made to his master, Uncle Daniel stands bound to his word as a kind of covenant between father and son. "I beliebs he lob'd me better dan any ob his kin," he declares in defense of Master Robert (25); and of himself, he says, "I used to nuss Marse Robert jes' de same as ef I were his own fadder" (21). Notably, Uncle Daniel's position reflects Richard Allen's experience as a slave, and the subsequent emphasis Allen placed on Christian faith in addressing those still enslaved. Allen himself "had been an exceptional slave with an exceptional master," notes Walker. And thus, "[t]o slaves with kind masters he wrote: 'You may put your trust in God, who sees your condition, and as a merciful father pitieth his children, so doth God pity them that love Him; and as your hearts are inclined to serve God, you will feel an affectionate reward [sic] toward your masters and mistresses, so-called, and the whole family in which you live. This will be seen by them and tend to promote your liberty, especially with such as have feeling masters'" (Life Experience, qtd. in Walker 12). From Uncle Daniel's own similar position of faith, the word (Word) that binds him transcends culturally determined positions of race and social condition.

In characteristic contrast, Robert Johnson and Tom Anderson challenge Uncle Daniel's decision as illogical, if not hypocritical. "What's the use prayin' for a thing if, when it comes, you won't take it?" Robert argues, making a clear distinction between prayer and action, i.e. what he sees as the difference between waiting and doing. Indeed, though Robert and his mistress also "had strong personal likings for each other" (7), and though she had given him a kind of gift of words through reading instruction, he does not hesitate
to use the "machinery" of their contract against her -- e.g. by reading the words forbidden to slaves in the newspapers, and "abandoning" her for the Union army's promise of freedom. Contributing his own challenge to Uncle Daniel, Tom in turn maintains that "promises, like pie crusts, is meant to be broken" -- especially, he adds, if they are made by southern white masters (25). For both Robert and Tom, the desire to take matters of freedom into their own hands is not an unreasonable one; they feel more betrayed than betraying. And yet, what each man possesses in what might be labeled "practical" sense, he lacks in the unconditional trust and "child-like faith" modeled by believers in "ole time religion." In the eyes of youthful impatience, apparently simple religious approaches like "resignation" and "hope," or the Christian message (offered by Aunt Katie) that "we must forgive" (28), indicate personal weakness -- indeed, giving up -- more than the patient self-surrender to divine will that "folks" like Uncle Daniel and Aunt Katie embrace.

While the "applications" of faith by old and young are thus seemingly at odds, the notion that prayer and action, hope and planning must necessarily commingle is initially evident in Harper's depiction of the prayer meetings attended at great risk by slaves from all generations. Held in the secrecy of the "unstructured" woods (notably untouched by the more formal influences of Church or theological institution), these early gatherings become much more than occasions for communal prayer otherwise denied by white slaveholders. Indeed, as described in Harper's text, the prayer meetings prove to be a space in which spiritual, social, and political concerns converge. Here, Uncle Daniel's stories (with an emphasis on what has been) combine with Robert's news of the war (with an emphasis on what is to come); the slaves "mingle" their "prayers and tears" with "plans for escaping to
the Union army" (13). And, perhaps most strikingly, Uncle Daniel's Christian motto of "standing by them that stands by you" (25) -- though distasteful to the young slaves in its proffered context of remaining loyal to Master Robert -- acquires new value for Robert and Tom when "applied" to (or combined with) their hopes for the future. As Robert himself declares: "Tom, if ever we get our freedom, we've got to learn to trust each other and stick together if we would be a people" (34).

Even beyond the margins of these clandestine prayer meetings, and the lives of individual slaves, the certain intersection of physical and spiritual realms is evidenced throughout Harper's novel in the depiction of war as a sign of God's intervention in human history. Indeed, from the first chapter, "divine retribution" is described as a "legible transcript ... written upon the shuddering earth" with the blood of "God's poor children" (14); and the Union flag is upheld as an "ensign of deliverance" (8). Later, Harper's text righteously declares that "the Nation was destined to pass through the crucible of disaster and defeat" (24), suggesting a kind of fiery test of the nation's collective soul; and, even more pointedly, Harper's narrator asks, "Was it not true that the cause of a hapless people had become entangled with the lightnings of heaven, and dragged down retribution upon the land?" (emphasis added 39). In each of these instances, the "claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" are "applied" not only as prayer and/or action, but as a way of perceiving presumably secular events in light of a larger sacred design. The result is a religious conviction -- on the part of the author, her characters, and (Harper undoubtedly hopes) her readers alike -- that political (physical) retribution and deliverance are not only entangled with, but indistinguishable from divine (spiritual) retribution and deliverance.

Notably, Harper was not alone in her depiction of war along these lines. African
American contributors to the *Christian Recorder* during the war, for example, interpreted the conflict in general terms as "God's design" (qtd. in Walker 38), and more specifically as "God's punishment" and "instrument of justice" (Walker 42). In turn, white (and notably, Unitarian) writers like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Ralph Waldo Emerson interpreted the Civil War as "God's punishment for a sinful people" (Aaron 30).22

Overall, maintains Walker, "For Negroes and their abolitionist allies the war represented an enactment of Old and New Testament prophecies which foretold the coming of a millennium" (31). In particular, he writes, "During the course of their sojourn in America, Negroes had come to think of their experience as similar to that of the Jews in Egypt. They were an oppressed people whom God in the fullness of time would deliver from bondage. The Civil War was God's vehicle of deliverance" (31-32).

Given this particular rhetorical context upon which she builds, what then does it mean for a black woman like Harper — writing in the years well beyond war and (failed) Reconstruction — to further advance this interpretation? With what purpose does she reconstruct this particular understanding of history for a late nineteenth-century audience?

What seems apparent with hindsight is that the representation of the Civil War as a vehicle

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22In his introduction to *The Unwritten War*, American literary scholar Daniel Aaron highlights Holmes, who interpreted the Civil War as "our Holy War" (28); Emerson, who claimed that "Guided by conscience, a militant North would redeem America for all its sinful years since the century began" (35); and Boston Unitarian minister John Weiss, a friend and biographer of Theodore Parker, who also argued that "the Civil War was a holy war engendered by a heavenly fiat." Weiss called the war "the first truly religious war ever waged," quotes Aaron, "because it had nothing to do with rival theologies, because it was fought to restore attributes and prerogatives of manhood,' and because it signified a nation's attempt to uproot its own giant evils" (xviii). In turn, religious historian Martin Marty maintains that "Almost to a man the Northern ministers of note connected the will of God with the fate of the North." He notes in particular the Liberal Congregationalist Horace Bushnell, who "shouted that the Civil War was 'a religion, it is God!' Every drumbeat was a hymn, said the minister; the cannon thundered God, 'the electric silence, darting victory along the wires, is the unaudible greeting of God's favoring word and purpose'" (*Pilgrims in Their Own Land* 223). For more on the representations of Civil War in literature, see Aaron; Wilson.
of redemption fostered a false sense of security among African Americans -- that is, a misleading sense that with divine intervention would come the end of suffering and, in turn, sudden "deliverance" into a "brighter day" of equal treatment and opportunity. Indeed, as Walker writes, black Americans had come to believe that the "[i]ntemecine strife" of civil war "would purge the nation of the sin of slavery and eradicate those barriers which had prevented them from entering the mainstream of American life" (31). And, once those barriers were removed, suggests Saidiya Hartman, the newly emancipated were encouraged to believe that "[t]he full privileges of citizenship awaited those who realized the importance of proper conduct." The key point along these lines, however, seems to have been how "proper conduct" was both defined and promoted. As Hartman notes, "missionaries, schoolteachers, entrepreneurs, and other self-proclaimed 'friends of the Negro'" relied predominantly on practical manuals and handbooks to advance the ideas (and ideals) of "appropriate conduct" among the freed -- texts like Isaac Brinckerhoff's *Advice to Freemen*, Jared Bell Waterbury's *Friendly Counsels for Freedmen*, Helen E. Brown's *John Freeman and His Family*, and Clinton Bowen Fisk's *Plain Counsels for Freedmen* (128). Published by the American Tract Society -- "an evangelical organization established in 1825 'to diffuse a knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of sinners, and to promote the interests of vital godliness and sound morality, by the circulation of Religious Tracts'" (Hartman 128) -- such textbooks were designed to instill a fairly standardized nineteenth-century Protestant ethic of self-discipline, industry, and duty. But the identity that they defined for the former slaves, specifically, more often than not replicated a common antebellum assumption that linked Christian piety to humility, obedience, and servility. The juxtaposition of terms within Hartman's own list is
especially revealing along these lines: "The lessons contained in these primers were basically a series of imperatives — be industrious, economical, useful, productive, chaste, kind, respectful to former masters, good Christians, and dutiful citizens" (129).

Writing *Iola Leroy* as late as 1892, Harper would no doubt have recognized the failure of war and Reconstruction to "deliver" black Americans to a new position in American society, to award "the privileges of full citizenship," or to erase racial conflict. The apparent lynching of the mulatto heroine of her first-known novel, *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869) — a novel considered by some scholars to be the narrative precursor to *Iola Leroy* — alone makes it clear that Harper was painfully aware of "the brutal elements of society in that sin-cursed region" of the Reconstruction South (*Minnie's Sacrifice* 81). Just as she does in constructing for the teacher-activist Minnie a "higher, holier destiny," portraying her life as one of "lofty self-sacrifice and beautiful self-consecration, finished at the post of duty, and rounded off with the fiery crown of martyrdom" (*Minnie's Sacrifice* 91), however, Harper reconstructs Christian faith in *Iola Leroy* not as a tool to reinforce established cultural hierarchies or to ensure a defined social order, but as a means of both resistance and liberation, activism and justice. Indeed, for Harper, divine presence in the world does not mean the end of strife, the "brighter day" come, but the beginning of change informed by Christian morality and faith, "a brighter coming day." And it is through the lens of this conviction that she re-presents the bravery and selflessness of the Union soldiers in particular in terms of divine sacrifice, and the achieved goal of their "crusade" as the birth of a newly-anointed people.

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24 I draw here from Foster's title phrase: *A Brighter Coming Day.*
At the heart of Harper's depiction, of course, is the same mingling of the "spirit of Christ" and "universal love" with "deeds of noble daring" and "brave and lofty actions" that characterized her own life's work.25 As early as 1859, in a letter to the "devoutly religious radical abolitionist" John Brown, in fact, Harper identified the necessary combination of both faith and action in effecting change and shaping new identities on personal, national, and even universal levels.26 "The Cross becomes a glorious ensign when Calvary's page-browed sufferer yields up his life upon it," she wrote to Brown as he awaited his own execution for his raid on Harpers Ferry. "And if Universal Freedom is ever to be the dominant power of the land," she continued, "your bodies may be only her first stepping stones to dominion." (Brighter 49). Here, through Harper's careful interpretation, Brown's militant action and subsequent death are aligned with Christ's perceived crime and crucifixion; and later, Brown's "martyr grave" is depicted as "a sacred altar" to physical emancipation in the same way that Christ's cross "becomes a glorious ensign" to spiritual redemption. Thirty-three years later, in writing Iola Leroy, Harper constructs a similarly balanced historical and theological view. Tom Anderson, for example, although (or perhaps because) he is physically unfit to fight, lays down his life to preserve the lives of others: "Someone must die to get us out of this," he says to a boat full of soldiers caught in the firing line of the Rebel army. "I ought's well be him as any.

25These are ideas that appear repeatedly in Harper's work; the specific phrases quoted here, however, come from letters written in 1859 and 1860. See A Brighter Coming Day 51-52.
26The description of Brown here comes from McGlone 103. As the white leader of the Harpers Ferry raid (October 16-18, 1859), Brown was considered a hero of multiple distinction among African Americans. As McGlone writes: "Through the years, African American writers have seen Brown variously as a symbol of humanity and brotherhood, a martyr to the cause of emancipation, a voice for forcible resistance, a prophet of racial strife, God's instrument to ignite a war to end slavery, and a sign of white America's eventual redemption" (103).
You are soldiers and can fight. If they kill me, it is nuthin' " (53). He dies a "faithful" and "devoted" friend of all, confident that he is "gwine to glory" (53). Like Tom, other young men "stricken down in the flush of their prime" are portrayed in Harper's text in the light of their sacred exchange: they are "pale young corpses, sacrificed on the altar of slavery" for the greater good of the African American race (59). And even the white Union officer, Captain Sybil -- fighting in "one of the decisive struggles of the closing conflict" -- is characterized as having "laid down his life on the altar of freedom" (139). Perceived as much more than victims of a cultural or political clash, Union supporters, foot soldiers, and officers alike, black and white together, are lauded in *Iola Leroy* as martyrs to a higher Christian cause.

In its broadest (and most contemporary) terms, perhaps, the social-spiritual nature of Harper's reading of history, and her reconstruction of African American identity within that history, might be understood as a kind of liberation theology on her part -- one, specifically, in which the ideals of spiritual and physical freedom are inextricably joined, and thus one in which the concerns of men like Uncle Daniel and men like Robert and Tom are united. From the text's earliest chapters, for example, Robert Johnson feels the "all-absorbing passion" and "love" for freedom "in the depths of his soul" (emphasis added 35); and, indeed, later he declares that "[i]f any man wants to save my soul he ain't going to beat my body" (emphasis added 48). As one slave representative of many, Robert recognizes no viable distinction between body and soul: if one is bound, then so is the other.27 Thus, when mortal freedom is achieved, the victory is expressed in the

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27 The brief story told by Tom Anderson of the dying Guinea slave on Old Master Anderson's plantation reflects this conviction in a similar fashion. As Tom recounts it, the man "thought that when he died he would go back to his ole country." And thus, all he wanted (and received) from his master before he died were his free papers -- so that he could "go back a free man." Whether indeed he was to be delivered "back
corresponding achievement of spiritual rebirth and resurrection. The claim that the Union soldiers "changed that old sepulchre of slavery into the cradle of new-born freedom" (137), for instance, would no doubt recall for Harper's Christian readers Christ's resurrection from a seemingly inescapable stone grave and thereby his redemption of a sinful world. And the marked aftermath of Lee's surrender to Grant reflects a similar interpretation. "[O]n the brows of a ransomed people God poured the chrism of a new era," Harper writes, "and they stood a race newly anointed with freedom" (138) -- suggesting a baptism of the faithful that washes away what has before corrupted the soul (here, most certainly, the nation's soul), and which marks the newly freed as God's "chosen."

These are the "[e]arnest, self sacrificing souls that will stamp themselves not only on the present but the future," whose sacrifices are the "first stepping stones to dominion," Harper suggests. And thus, in turn, they become what Harper called "the foundations of an historic character" ("Our Greatest Want" 104) -- a character that is not only shaped by "leading ideas," but which shapes them as well. In this light, a man like Uncle Daniel becomes not a model of some past way of life that must be left behind in order to make room for "progress," but rather a model of a way of living that continually shapes African American identity. Uncle Daniel does in fact go further in his loyalty to Master Robert than either Robert Johnson or Tom Anderson (and perhaps even Harper's readers) would like; and yet, what Harper emphasizes (and what both Robert and Tom eventually emulate) in his character are the moral strength and honor which inform his mode of living, even at

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28 I borrow again from "Our Greatest Want" (104) and Harper's letter to John Brown, respectively.

to Africa" (according to his own belief) or to "de oder world" of heaven (as Tom interprets it), the Guinea man died with a smile and declaration that indicate the simultaneous joy of an unbound spirit with the freeing of the physical body. "Tse free at las' " were his final (double)meaningful words (23).
personal cost. Through "folk" figures like Uncle Daniel, and through those who apply his Christian example to their own lives, then, Harper places at the foundations of a "new" African American identity an uncorrupted, living faith — one that must inform action just as it is itself informed by engaging with existing cultural forces. And it is at this foundation, she suggests, that talent unites with integrity, genius with character, "the enthusiasm of youth" with "the experience of age" (Iola Leroy 251). One cannot be understood without the other, she maintains throughout her novel; and, in turn, change cannot be effected without both.29

Community of Fragments: A Unified Body of Faith

Significantly, the transformative convergence of old and new, prayer and planning, envisioned hope and enacted deliverance that takes place in the hidden prayer meetings and open battlefields of Harper's novel is both accomplished in and modeled by her title character, Iola Leroy. Indeed, as a woman who has passed from the (blinding) "sunshine" of white southern womanhood through the (enlightening) "shadow" of slavery, Iola embodies the coming together of seemingly disparate cultural positions and experiences. She is at turns both the white daughter of a southern slaveholder who, loyal to her father, "always defended slavery when it was under discussion" (97), and a young woman eventually "reduced to slavery" because of the "Negro blood in [her] veins" (105) and repeatedly demeaned by "outrages ... which might well crimson the cheek of honest womanhood with shame" (115). She receives a formal education in the North, and yet learns valuable lived lessons from the "folk" in her native South. She models the patient

29For another interpretation of Harper's "reading of history" in Iola Leroy -- and of the novel itself as a "rewriting" of "the conventions of war narrative" -- see Young.
self-sacrifice and service of the women especially who have come before her, but she simultaneously transforms that ideal to include a broader social-spiritual ministry. At each turn, with each convergence of apparently opposing forces, Iola experiences deep interior conflict. Still, as Harper's text ultimately suggests, it is the progression of both mind and soul through this conflict of extremes that character is shaped.

Held up to comparison, in fact, the nature of Iola's tribulation is strikingly similar to the "crucible of disaster and defeat" through which the entire nation was "destined" to pass. In response to her mother's observation after the war that she is much "changed" from the girl she used to be, for example, Iola explains, "I have passed through a fiery ordeal of suffering" (195). Later, Dr. Latimer echoes this interpretation of Iola's experience when he asks her, "You have been tried in the fire, but are you not better for the crucial test?" (272). Mirroring the religious conviction by (and through) which Harper reads national conflict, there is a suggestion in each of these reflective moments that Iola's "fiery" trial has been Divinely orchestrated, designed to at once challenge and strengthen her faith. More importantly, it is Iola's ability to perceive sacred purpose in personal hardship -- indeed, to recognize her experience as a "ministry of suffering" (114) -- and to apply this lesson to an ailing nation through her own "gentle, womanly ministrations," that distinguishes Iola as an instrument of God. As did Jarena Lee before her, that is, Iola becomes a physical embodiment of divine spirit and will -- a "living epistle" (to borrow a description from the novel's Robert Johnson, 47), enacting God's Word more than simply proclaiming it. And in this sense, she comes to represent on an individual scale the entangling of the "lightnings of heaven" with the "cause of a hapless people" which Harper depicts on a more universal
scale in her novel.30

Though Lola reflects and carries forward the "faithful" and "devoted" service of many women before her -- including "folk" characters such as Aunt Linda, Aunt Katie, Aunt Kizzy and Mam Liza, who are portrayed as "dear, old saint[s]" (47) -- perhaps the most direct measure and model of her "womanly" faith and devotion is her mother, Marie Leroy. As a woman who has achieved increased faith in her own "darkest hour" of slavery (107) -- a woman who has (as she herself explains it) learned Christianity through direct suffering, "at the foot of the cross" (107) -- Marie too is portrayed as a kind of sacred vessel. As her then master but future husband, Eugene Leroy, recounts of his first interest in Marie:
"[T]here was something in her different from all my experience of womanhood ... It was something such as I have seen in old cathedrals, lighting up the beauty of a saintly face" (69). In Leroy's (white) eyes, what distinguishes Marie from the "beautiful [white] women in the halls of wealth and fashion" (69) is a holy presence illuminated (if "Unseen") in her face, her voice, and her ministrations; and it is this "new" spiritual quality which causes him to reevaluate his definition of true womanhood. Indeed, as he offers to his cousin Lorraine in direct comparison, and criticism: "I think that slavery and the lack of outside interests are beginning to tell on the lives of our women. They lean too much on the slaves, have too much irresponsible power in their hands, are narrowed and compressed by the routine of plantation life and the lack of intellectual stimulus" (64).

As a "pure" and "virtuous" servant to Leroy -- who is himself described as a physically "broken-down young man" with a matching soul that "slumbered and seemed pervaded with a moral paralysis" (68) -- Marie is portrayed as nothing short of a savior.

30At other turns, Lola is described as a "trembling dove" (39) and an "angel" (41), both holy emissaries linking heaven and earth.
Indeed, as Leroy describes her ministry, "She followed me down to the borders of the grave, and won me back to life and health" (68); and later, he adds, "In her presence every base and unholy passion died, subdued by the supremacy of her virtue" (70). By means of a "simple, childlike faith" that possessed in genuine goodness and "loving response" what it may have lacked in formal education and "culture" (as Leroy labels it, 68), Marie awakened in Leroy "sentiments to which [he] was a stranger" (71). And, with striking similarity to the promise that binds a character like Uncle Daniel to his master -- i.e. a pledge to "[stand] by them that stands by you," regardless of race or social standing -- Marie's "faithful care" elicits a corresponding determination from Leroy to "reward" with the sacred contract of marriage the woman who "stood by me when others deserted me to die in loneliness and neglect" (72). Unfortunately, the strength of Leroy's promise later fails in the face of his own "feeble moral resistance" (86). By his own admission, he has "neither the courage of a martyr, nor the faith of a saint" (79) -- the very qualities, notably, that Harper emphasizes in her depiction of "true character." As a result, he does not "battle against public opinion," but rather "drift[s] along," believing that his "hands are tied by law and custom" (79). As a consequence, of course, his wife and children are bound as well.

Nearly twenty years later, Iola's gentle ministrations awaken in Dr. Gresham a devotion similar to that which passed between her parents; but Iola's response to these parallel conditions marks her singular difference from Marie Leroy. Like her mother before her, for example, the sheer virtue of Iola's example and the spiritual power of her presence is enough to inspire "manhood" and "chivalry" in Dr. Gresham -- "a desire to defend and protect her all through her future life" (58). And in these moments of mutual affection -- moments in which Dr. Gresham and Iola each perceives his/her "ideal" companion in the
other, and in which hearts become "entwined" one around the other (59, 111) -- there is a suggestion that love might be compared to loyalty and faith in its ability to surmount socially-imposed (racial) barriers. Indeed, as Dr. Gresham himself maintains, "Love, like faith, laughs at impossibilities" (112). Still, like Eugene Leroy before him, what Dr. Gresham wants most to do for Iola is to "bury her secret in his [white] Northern home" (59) and thus to "protect" her from the prejudice and social ostracism she will most certainly suffer as a black woman. Ultimately, it is this kind of blind love (to twist a phrase) -- one that would deny a full part of her heritage -- that Iola rejects in declining Dr. Gresham's offer of marriage, even at the sacrifice of her own soul's affection. And it is in this rejection and sacrifice that Iola revises the example of faith modeled by her mother.

While Marie embodied a genuine and virtuous belief, that is, it was one essentially limited by (and to) its isolation from the cultural forces that a living faith must confront. Indeed, after her marriage to Eugene, "Marie's life flowed peacefully on," but this was accomplished only by her removal from larger cultural concerns, by being "[s]hut out from the busy world, its social cares and anxieties" (89). By making a different choice, Iola represents faith as a mode of living that fully engages the world and other people, at once challenging and drawing from positions of authority in order to reshape "leading ideas."

Specifically, Iola comes to embody a faith that neither subdues her nor sets her apart from the world, but rather a faith that necessarily confronts and shapes worldly interests. In exchange for a personal or individual love that would conceal even in its aim to protect, for instance, Iola embraces a community whose need for the direct "application" of love and faith is at once deeper and more immediate; and in this way she becomes Harper's
model of "true" Christianity. From her first experiences with the victims of slavery and war, Iola's shared sorrow "binds her heart in loving compassion to every sufferer who needed her gentle ministrations" (emphasis added 40); and her decision to continue serving that community, rather than forsake it by "passing" for white womanhood, seals her own faithful covenant with the African American race. As Iola declares to Dr. Gresham in the midst of war, "I did not choose my lot in life, but I have no other alternative than to accept it ... I intend, when this conflict is over, to cast my lot with the freed people as a helper, teacher and friend" (114). And, once the war has ended, she adds, "I must serve the race which needs me most" (235). By accepting this "cup" that she earlier "would have pressed to the lips of others" (as she herself describes it to Dr. Gresham, 273), Iola notably mirrors the sacrifice and faithfulness embodied by Christ in his darkest hour at Gethsemane; and Harper's nineteenth-century Christian readers would have readily recognized the comparison. Indeed, in an anguished prayer before his arrest and trial, Christ first asked that "the cup" of suffering and crucifixion be taken away from him; yet, in the same moment, he trustingly surrendered to the will of God, not his own.31 In the Christian tradition, Christ's acceptance of the cup — of certain personal suffering and death for the greater good of humankind — became the measure of true character, commitment, and fidelity, and marked the advent of a new age of salvation. In the broader historical scheme of Harper's novel (as noted earlier), this "new covenant" in Christ's blood, poured out for all people, is reflected in the representation of civil war as a "transcript" of divine retribution written with the blood of "God's poor children." On a smaller scale, it is reflected in the pledge that Iola — and the faithful like her — make to the people newly

annointed with freedom. Like her mother before her, then, Iola does in fact learn her Christianity through direct suffering, "at the foot of the cross"; but she also bravely chooses to live her life by the model of the cross as a sacred covenant between individual and community. In doing so, Iola redefines true (Christian) womanhood, merging new strength, courage and activism with the example of tender, virtuous and faithful ministrations.32

As an embodiment of intersecting cultural positions and perspectives, with a character both tested and refined in the crucible of suffering, Iola clearly represents Harper’s "greatest want" for both her own African American community and for the nation at large — specifically, "true men and true women" who will carry forward the knowledge and power of those who have come before them, even as they fight new "battles of life" (to use Robert Johnson's phrase, 170). As old Aunt Linda rightly speculates, "I don't think dese young folks is goin' ter take things as we's allers done" (171). And yet, in the glimpse of the future that Harper's text offers through Iola in particular, what is to come is continually shaped by what has been. Within these terms, then, what this newest crusade has at its foundations is an awareness of sacred purpose entangled with earthly concern, and a personal faith strengthened by Christ-like suffering, even as it requires an increased sense of duty to both exercise and inspire in the "outside" world a renewed moral and spiritual ideal. Indeed, implicit within the signal privilege of being one of "God's chosen" is the

32 Barbara Christian's discussion of the social image of a "white southern lady" is useful here for contrast. As Christian writes, "Above all her other attributes, the lady was expected to be Christian" — which translated into submissiveness and purity. She was expected to be "intensely religious," Christian notes, "but not to have the intellectual fibre necessary to be a minister of the church" (Black Women Novelists 16-17). Harper reconstructs this image for the black woman, who can be intelligent, strong, and powerful as well as pure, gentle, and refined.
balanced responsibility of fulfilling a divine commission. And, for "young folks" like Iola Leroy, her brother Harry, Lucille Delany, and Dr. Latimer, specifically, answering this call means combating "Christless prejudice" with Christian justice (126); teaching others to "look at their opportunities in the light of the face of Jesus Christ" (235); and, ultimately, engendering a nation that is Christian in practice rather than "Christian in name" alone (emphasis added 124).

Primary among these post-bellum "battles of life" is the reunification -- indeed, the reconstruction -- of communal and familial ties severed by slavery. As Iola herself discloses the "purpose of her soul" to Dr. Gresham, for example: "I have resolved never to marry until I have found my mother. The hope of finding her has colored all my life since I regained my freedom. It has helped sustain me in the hour of fearful trial" (118). For Robert Johnson, too, the desire "[t]o bind anew the ties which slavery had broken and gather together the remnants of his scattered family became the earnest purpose of [his] life" (148). Regardless of whether the separation has lasted "half a dozen years" (as with Iola, 195) or "more than twenty" (as with Robert, 141), the hope of reunion for both -- and for all those whom they represent -- takes on the dimensions of a sacred mission. The purpose of the soul (of faith and devotion) becomes one with the purpose of life (of active planning and searching), echoing the notion of covenant between brother and sister, parent and child, husband and wife alike.

Within the context of Harper's novel, of course, the spiritual nature of this hope and mission for unity is evidenced long before the close of the war. Before emancipation, for instance, heaven offered the only certain communion -- and, in fact, the only true "home" -- for those separated in earthly life. On his death bed, Tom Anderson demonstrates faith in
just such a gathering when he asks Iola to "[t]ell all de boys to meet me in heben" (54). Gracie Leroy, too, rests more easily in death knowing that "[Iola] and mother and Harry must meet me in heaven" (108). And, as one of the few in his family who remains alive in body, Uncle Daniel follows Christian example to ensure that he will join his wife and sons "in glory": "I 'spects to see 'em for long," he declares, " 'Cause I'se tryin' to dig deep, build sure, an' make my way from earth to glory" (189). Confident of their status as God's children, those dying to (and for) slavery, as well as those living beyond it, rely upon the promise of God's eternal family as a source of both physical and spiritual survival. In essence, it is this deeply-rooted sense of responsibility to the larger (heavenly) community that impels each member to remain true to the (living) Word.

Once the war begins, the possibility of union on earth becomes intertwined with the hope of a heavenly meeting, enhancing the sacred nature of a human mission. When Harry Leroy joins the Union army, for example, his actions are fuelled more by moral conviction than by political ambition. "I certainly would [like to enlist]," he declares to his guardian in the north, "not so much for the sake of fighting for the Government, as with the hope of finding my mother and sister, and avenging their wrongs" (125). There is "no sacrifice too great" in finding his family, Harry affirms -- not even casting his lot "with the despised and hated negro" rather than "posing" as a white man (126-7). And, in fact, this test of his familial love and communal loyalty -- one that mirrors his sister's own trial and choice -- is eventually rewarded by reunion with his mother in a Mississippi field hospital, where "her presence was a call to life" (191). With marked similarity, Iola achieves her first steps toward family reunification while ministering to a wounded Robert Johnson, upon whom

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"her presence had a soothing effect" as well (139). Indeed, modeling her grandmother and mother before her, Lola effects connection by the "low, sweet tones" of an old family hymn -- a kind of live prayer that fuses her at once with "mother" and "sister" in Robert's imagination. Importantly, it is this same hymn that later proves the spiritual call and link between the scattered members of Lola and Robert's family.

For a people thus long-denied the promise of an earthly reunion with their families, and even denied the privilege of meeting publicly with other members of their race, freedom of the body after the war becomes synonymous with the freedom to gather and worship. Indeed, as a direct complement to the secret prayer meetings concealed in the "unstructured" woods of slavery, the post-bellum prayer meetings of Harper's novel are portrayed at once as a means of physical and spiritual unification -- for broken, scattered families, and for a broken, scattered race. And the importance of such unity for both healing (of past wrongs) and growth (of future independence) is reflected in the narrative parallels made between human community and divine acts. Upon arriving late to one of two widely-attended religious conferences depicted in *Iola Leroy*, for example, Aunt Linda contends, "Neber mine ... sometimes de las' ob de wine is de bes'" (179). As Harper's Christian readers most likely would have noted, this simple statement links the experience of the newly-freed with Christ's first miracle at the wedding feast of Cana -- the first public sign, according to Christian tradition, of a "new day" or new Christian era in human history.33 In turn, Aunt Linda's statement echoes the traditional scriptural promise that no one can be too late in coming to a celebration of holy union that has "begun a'ready," for

33The Wedding at Cana, which in the Christian tradition is understood as the site of Christ's first miracle, is portrayed in John 2: 1-11. As the first public sign of God's intervention in human history in a "new" way, this miracle has particular relevance to the historical period which Harper is depicting.
Within the framework of this first meeting (the same at which Robert Johnson is reunited with his mother by means of the old family hymn), the biblical refrain "I was lost but now I'm found" (recited by Lola, 197) enjoys increased significance as well. Specifically, the suggestion of active searching (and selection) on God's part, with its commensurate promise of divine salvation, is aligned with the horror of literally being lost from one's family in slavery, and the corresponding joy of being found again in the union (Union) after the war. Here again, in one simple passage, the severing and reunification of individual (and communal) ties to a racial family reflects the larger severing and necessary reunification of national ties to a human family, which in turn echoes the divine covenant threatened by slavery but regained by emancipation and national contest.

Among the groups gathered at these early Methodist church conferences, Harper writes, were "remnants of broken families" (179), "once-severed branches" of a family tree (215) — images seemingly contradictory in their suggestion of a community of fragments. And yet, revealed in the distinct commingling of past, present, and future in the design of one meeting is a more striking intimation of the many branches of one vine, the many parts of one Christian body — individual and separate, but unable to accomplish much without the whole. Indeed, for Harper's Christian readers, such a model of reunification would have likely resonated with scriptural invocations to unity even (or especially) in the face of apparent variety and difference. As Paul reflected to a socially divided Corinthian community, for example: "[T]here are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are diversities of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of

34 Several gospel passages offer the promise that "many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first" (Matthew 19:30). See especially Matthew 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30.
operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all ... For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ" (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6, 12). In similar terms, the "remnants" of individual African American families come together in Harper's novel to create a larger unified body of faith. In the course of a single church gathering, as Harper describes it, members unite "to break bread with each other" (celebrating their collective salvation in the immediate moment), "[to] relate their experiences" (bearing public witness to what has been), and "[to] tell of their hopes of heaven" (sharing their visions of the future) (179). Joined by a common Christian purpose, each member of the community contributes to and draws from the collected body; "old" relies upon "young," and "young" upon "old" in a mutual exchange of faith and experience, prayer and action, vision and planning. And in this convergence, the newly-anointed of Harper's narrative (re)enact the beginnings of a new ministry in the world.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the one character who is able to look "beyond the present pain to a brighter future for the race," and who feels most deeply "the grandeur of a divine commission to labor for its uplifting" is Iola Leroy herself (219-20). As Dr. Gresham concedes to Iola at the end of the war (and as Dr. Latimer echoes years later), "[O]ut of the race must come its own defenders" (115, 263); and, in fact, in the reconstructive phases of Harper's text, Iola and an "army" of "excellent and superior women" like her emerge with "an invasion of ideas" to fight a united battle of life throughout the south (145-6). For Iola specifically (and, not doubt, for Harper through her), the defense and "uplifting" of the race comes most effectively through education and the moral enrichment of the home; thus,
in establishing her own school in the basement of a church, where religion becomes both the literal and figurative foundation of learning, she teaches her students -- young and old alike -- not only the "rudiments of knowledge" but also "good character" (147). Together with women like Lucille Delany, who also embodies Iola's (re)definition of ideal womanhood in her bravery, intellect and religiosity (242), Iola represents the "hope for the future" of the African American race. "In [young women like you] I see reflected some of the blessed possibilities which lie within us," Marie Leroy declares to Lucille (200); and, in the strength and unity of their sense of duty, Harper adds, Iola and Lucille demonstrate the "power" of Christian women "to be moral and spiritual forces among a people who so much needed their helping hands" (200). Indeed, as instruments of divine purpose, Harper's text alludes, they hold in their ministering, mothering hands the "chrism of a new era."

If the moral and spiritual education of the race thus calls for and relies upon "a union of women with the warmest hearts and clearest brains" (254) -- i.e. enlightened mothers and teachers who will raise "manly," "self-respecting" boys and "useful," "self-reliant" girls for the future success of the race (253) -- then the corresponding "great need of the race" is "noble, earnest men," argues Iola (172) and "enlightened fathers," Lucille Delany adds (253). In answer to this call, Harry Leroy becomes a "fearless," "outspoken" member of his bravely elected race, a teacher and "leader among the rising young men of the State" (201). As he proudly declares to his Uncle Robert, who admires the young man's "noble purposes" and "lofty enthusiasm": "Now that I have linked my fortunes to my race I intend to do all I can for its elevation" (203). Dr. Latimer, too, fulfills the new ideal of "high, heroic manhood," both in the embrace of his mother's (black) race as his
own, and in his heightened sense of duty to go "where his services were most needed" (though perhaps not most professionally profitable). "I cannot help admiring one who acts as if he felt that the weaker the race is the closer he would cling to it," Iola professes to Dr. Latimer with some self-admitted "hero worship" (263); notably, however, what she admires in the doctor and in her brother is the same self-sacrificing ministry and loyal service that she herself has modeled against greater odds. Thus, if they are heroes, Iola is a heroine -- one, according to Dr. Latimer (and to Harper in turn), who "ought to be made the subject of a soul-inspiring story" (264).

*Iola Leroy* is, in fact, that story; and, tellingly, as it nears its end, the healing unification of past and present, old and young, mothers and children -- all gradually achieved through "hope and tears," faith and suffering, prayer and action -- ultimately gives way to the union of heroine and hero, woman and man, toward the healthy future of a "chosen" people. As Dr. Gresham muses in one of the late chapters of Harper's narrative, "[T]he South needed the surrender of the best brain and heart of the country to build, above the wastes of war, more stately temples of thought and action" (emphasis added 236); and indeed, among these "new" noble and sacred institutions, dedicated at once to the worship and in-dwelling of the divine, are marriage and the home. In asking Iola to "share [his] lot" in life, for example, Dr. Latimer does not propose to her a life of "ease and luxury," nor do his words simply "[woo] her to love and happiness" (271). Instead, in the light of a dawning era anointed by God, the "reconstructed" temple of marriage that Dr. Latimer offers to Iola's spiritual vision is "a life of high and holy worth" (271), a new ministry of
shared work (i.e. "better done than when it is performed alone" [242]) that inspires her heart and soul. In turn, while Dr. Latimer concedes to Iola that "year after year I may have to struggle to keep the wolf from the door," he foresees a home sanctified by love: "[Y]our presence would make my home one of the brightest on earth, and one of the fairest types of heaven," he declares (271). In this final union of Harper's novel, earth remains entangled with heaven; "grand and noble purposes" are fused with faith (271); and life's "deepest pain" converges with the soul's "highest joy" (274). United in a sacred covenant with each other that reflects their mutual covenant with the African American race, Iola and Dr. Latimer stand together "on the threshold of a new era," and consider it a "blessed privilege" to "labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new commonwealth of freedom" (271).

Like Iola and Dr. Latimer, Harper's novel itself is positioned on a "threshold" of history, a passageway connecting "old" and "new." Lucille Delany reflects this positioning most precisely, perhaps, in a closing chapter of *Iola Leroy*: "Instead of forgetting the past," she states, "I would have [our people] hold in everlasting remembrance our great deliverance" (251). There can be no enlightened future without knowledge of the past, she suggests; no genuine devotion without the trials of suffering. By creating a "good, strong book" that unites history with the future, the "experience of age" with the "enthusiasm of youth" (251), Frances Harper certainly ensures this remembrance. Even more importantly, however, she offers a (re)new(ed) lens through which to read the events that usher in a new era. From the perspective of those who have learned their faith "at the foot of the cross," Harper attempts to "awaken" a whole nation to more "Christlike humanity" and hope in the promise of divine justice (282).35 Answering her own sacred call "to do
something of lasting service for the race," she offers *Iola Leroy* as a kind of *living epistle* in its own right — words "replete with life and glowing with love" like the healing faith they aim to portray and inspire. In her own terms, that is, Harper offers her final novel not simply as an homage to Christian ideals, or as a record of what she herself believes. Rather, in writing this particular narrative, Harper is doing what faith requires of her. Indeed, by both exploring and "mingling" various (and seeming incompatible) social and theological concerns, she maps out for her readers the complex cultural terrain that must be charted if faith is to have any influence in the post-Reconstruction world. And, in so doing, *Iola Leroy* becomes an act of faith within itself, engaged in the very work that Harper's Christian ideals demand.

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35John Ernest emphasizes this point when he notes that "Throughout the novel ... Harper argues that although the white race cannot put itself in the 'place' of African Americans, it needs the benefits of the African American perspective if it is to re-place its moral center" ("From Mysteries to Histories" 511). See also Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation* 203.
CONCLUSION

The distinction that Frederick Douglass makes in his 1845 *Narrative* between "the Christianity of this land" and "the Christianity of Christ" is (again) a useful lens through which to read the women writers represented in this study. As discussed in Chapter 1, this particular distinction is an important reminder to Douglass' readers -- nineteenth- and twenty-first-century alike -- that "religion" in general, or even "Christianity" more specifically, cannot be defined in singular terms. And indeed, the multiple and distinct forms of Christianity represented by Jarena Lee, Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Frances Harper point to this more complex understanding of religious faith. As evidenced in their texts, each of these women lived and wrote from within the conceptual framework that Douglass identifies: each is aware of a generalized institution of "religion" or "Christianity" that has become a political and cultural force in their world; and, in turn, each questions the extent to which such a generalized, abstract institution allows for the practice of the "Christianity of Christ." The challenge that each faces, then, is how to represent, inspire, even achieve a renewal of faith and moral reform not in the abstract (as life *might* be), but in this world (as it *is*).

Of course, the kind of duality that Douglass articulates — and the ways in which each of these women writers addresses it — actually re-emphasizes the real presence and force of the "Christianity of this land." Even as each of these women seeks through her writing to reaffirm a dynamic "Christianity of Christ" that exists outside of or beyond the
"Christianity of this land," that is — even as each insists on an active, individualized faith that is distinct from a generalized idea and practice of religion — each is responding to the "Christianity of this land" as an institution of cultural life. And, though each of these particular writers demonstrates an ability to perceive the living presence of a "Christianity of Christ" in her world (as I argue), certainly not every writer from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is able to make this distinction. Indeed, as is evidenced in each of the texts discussed in this study alone, the experience and expression of religious belief is much more complicated.

"The Soft-Hearted Sioux," a short story published in 1901 by Yankton Sioux writer Zitkala-Sa, is a case in point here. Written originally for the predominantly white, middle-class readers of *Harper's Monthly Magazine,* "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" details the personal, cultural, and spiritual conflicts of a young Sioux brave raised for sixteen years in his own native culture, educated for nearly ten years in a white missionary school, and then sent back to his native village as a young man "to preach Christianity" to his people (112).1 Narrating his own story, the unnamed Sioux of the title does not linger over the details of his early childhood or of his experience at the mission school, but rather upon his return to his familial and tribal community — a return in which he is perceived as (and feels himself to be) a "foreigner" to his own people, and a community in which his "soft" (and specifically Christian) heart has "unfitted [him] for everything" (119). Specifically, the young man who returns "with the white man's Bible in my hand, and the white man's

1 "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" was first published in the March 1901 issue of *Harper's.* (There is some evidence to suggest that, given its content, the story was rejected by the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1899 or 1900. See Spack 40n9.) The story was published a second time by Zitkala-Sa in her 1921 collection *American Indian Stories.* As Ruth Spack notes, Zitkala-Sa's audience at the turn of the century was white, but in 1921 she was also writing for a Native American audience (39).
tender heart in my breast" is scorned by his tribe as a disloyal son, "a traitor to his people," and a "fool," "false ... even to the Great Spirit who made him" (117-18). "With his prayers, let him drive away the enemy," challenges the Sioux medicine man. "With his soft heart, let him keep off starvation" (118). Predictably, perhaps, given this particular challenge, the soft-hearted Sioux indeed fails to protect his family by the story's end. His rejection of the medicine man's authority effects not only his own alienation from the tribe, but his parents' ostracism as well. And, though he eventually casts aside the mission-school lesson that it is "wrong to kill" (112) -- which he does in order to procure meat for his starving father -- his efforts prove too little and too late in the end. His father dies before he returns with "the best-fatted creature" from a local cattle herd; and the soft-hearted Sioux is himself jailed and sentenced to death for killing the white rancher from whom the animal was stolen.

Zitkala-Sa's criticisms in (and through) this story are multiple and layered. In none too subtle ways, for instance, she is critical of the U.S. government's broad-based killing of buffalo -- a primary source of physical and spiritual subsistence for the Sioux Indians -- and of the encroachment of white settlers. When the soft-hearted Sioux attempts to hunt food for his parents, he finds that "nowhere were there any other footprints but my own!" (120); and, ultimately, the only food within a day's tracking is "the white man's cattle" (121). And, to these hardships are added the effects of a U.S. government system that removed Indian children from their tribal communities to be educated in Christian mission schools. The policy of "Christian" assimilation at the heart of U.S. Indian reform is ineffectual in its intended design of self-fulfillment and community cohesiveness, Zitkala-Sa here criticizes.

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2On the symbolism of the buffalo and the "meditative rite" of hunting in Sioux culture, see especially Brown 61, 73-74; Carmody and Carmody 65.
Indeed, for all that it proposes to offer in terms of cultural advancement, she suggests, the education and "Christianization" of native peoples -- specifically, the indoctrination of white, middle-class, and Christian values -- threatens deep social-spiritual alienation and loss.\(^3\)

Zitkala-Sa herself was a product of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century policy of American Indian assimilation. As she details in three autobiographical essays published in consecutive issues of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900, she was born on the Yankton Reservation in Dakota Territory (1876) and spent her early childhood there with her mother. At age eight, she was taken "east" by missionaries to White's Manual Labor Institute in Indiana, a Quaker boarding school run according to the era's Indian education policy; and, she returned to the Yankton Reservation three years later. But the cultural alienation and spiritual loss she felt were so significant that she left again to complete her education at White's, and then to study for two years (1895-97) at Earlham College. Eventually, and with great personal struggle, she would return briefly to the Yankton Agency to recruit young students for the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania (where she taught from 1898-99).\(^4\)

As literary scholar Dexter Fisher notes, Zitkala-Sa was one of the first Native American women to present her own "side of the story" to a wide Euro-American audience without the help of an editor, interpreter, or ethnographer (Foreword v-vi). And indeed, her literary success among a predominantly non-Indian readership was in no small part

\(^3\)On the U.S. policy of American Indian assimilation -- including Protestant reform and Christian boarding schools -- see especially Adams; Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions*; Markowitz; Prucha; Takaki.

\(^4\)For additional biographical background, see Bernardin 214-15; Fisher, Foreword and "The Transformation of Tradition" 203-6.
made possible by the education she received at white- (and Christian-) run schools. The fact that her written work was considered suitable for publications such as Harper's and the Atlantic, for instance, is strong evidence that Zitkala-Sa was well-trained in the language and literary form(s) valued by white, middle-class culture. There is perhaps little surprise, then, that a story like "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" would create an angry response in her day from those most invested in the U.S. Indian education system. In an April 1901 edition of The Red Man and Helper, the newspaper of the Carlisle Indian School, for example, a reviewer pronounced Zitkala-Sa's story "morally bad" because of its challenge to "the very core" of Indian educational policy:

All that Zitkalasa [sic] has in the way of literary ability and culture she owes to the good people, who, from time to time, have taken her into their homes and hearts and given her aid. Yet not a word of gratitude or allusion to such kindness on the part of her friends has ever escaped her in any line of anything she has written for the public. By this course she injures herself and harms the educational work in progress for the race from which she sprang. (qtd. in Fisher, Foreword viii)

To her mother and her people on the Yankton Reservation, notes Fisher, Zitkala-Sa "was highly suspect because, in their minds, she had abandoned, even betrayed, the Indian way of life by getting an education in the white man's world." And yet, to those at Carlisle,

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5Wexler 28; Bernardin 216. Zitkala-Sa's literary career was relatively brief. In addition to the texts noted in this chapter — three autobiographical essays published in the Atlantic in 1900, "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" (1901) and "Why I Am Pagan" (1902) -- she published two more short stories in Harper's and Everybody's Magazine in 1901 and 1902 respectively. These essays and stories were later published in American Indian Stories (1921); and this collection, together with Old Indian Legends (1901), represents her published literary output. She went on to become a prominent Indian rights activist.

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"she was an anathema because she insisted on remaining 'Indian,' writing embarrassing articles ... that flew in the face of the assimilationist thrust of their education" (Foreword viii). "The Soft-Hearted Sioux," of course, reflects this fundamental dilemma.6

While few scholars to date have given attention to "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" in particular, several have drawn attention to Zitkala-Sa as one of the first Native American women writers to at once respond to and challenge white readers' assumptions about American Indians and about nineteenth-century U.S. efforts to "Americanize" them. And for those scholars who recognize religion (in general) or Christianity (in particular) as an oppressive tool in this Americanization process, Zitkala-Sa's autobiographical essays seem to provide especially rich material.7 Several scholars, for example, point to what they see as Zitkala-Sa's ironic use of Christian symbolism in these essays in order "to critique the destruction of Native American culture" (Cutter 34). Specifically, Susan Bernardin, Martha J. Cutter, Patricia Okker, and Sidonie Smith each suggest that Zitkala-Sa's autobiographical essays are, collectively, an inversion of the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden -- an inversion in which Zitkala-Sa's "fall from grace" is a "'fall' from Dakota culture into the white world" (Okker 95), and thus in which the "paleface" Christian missionaries are positioned as "seductive devils" who tempt her to go east to the mission

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6 As Susan Bernardin reports, in two letters to Yavapai physician Carlos Montezuma (to whom she was briefly engaged), Zitkala-Sa mentions conflicting public reactions to "The Soft-Hearted Sioux." "Already I've heard that at Carlisle my story is pronounced 'trash' and I -- 'worse than Pagan,'" she writes in a letter dated 5 March 1901. And yet, she notes, "Last week Harper's accepted another story of mine -- 'The Trial Path' -- that is purely Ancient history and won't bear hard on anyone's pet co[n]cerns." In a second letter, dated 17 March 1901, she writes, "In contrast with Carlisle's opinion of my work, Boston pats me on the back with no little pride. The Atlantic Monthly wrote me a note of praise of the story." (qtd. in Bernardin 215, 233.)

7 Part of this attention is due to the fact that these essays have now been "canonized" via their inclusion in both the Norton and Heath anthologies. But, to date, none of Zitkala-Sa's fiction has been anthologized. For a discussion on Zitkala-Sa and the canon, see especially Okker.
school (Smith 131). In this reading, these scholars argue that Zitkala-Sa "uses Christian motifs against their creators (white men)" in order "to dramatize the dangers Christianity poses to tribal survival" (Cutter 34, Bernardin 220). Indeed, according to her own representation, Zitkala-Sa suffers a deep sense of alienation and cultural dislocation as a result of her experience at an Indian boarding school; and, as a central component of her education there, "Christianity" is perceived of as a "denigrating" force, "hostile to Indian difference" (Smith 136).

Those few scholars who focus particularly on "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" discuss Zitkala-Sa's treatment of Christianity in the story in similar (and similarly absolute) terms. "Through its sustained mockery of America's 'tender heart,'" writes Susan Bernardin, "the story questions the very core of the Euro-American values taught at Indian schools." More specifically, she argues, "by depicting Christianity as an imposed ideology that fractured both the narrator's family and tribe, Zitkala-Sa directly challenged the evangelical foundation of Indian reform" (217). Patricia Okker, too, notes that the narrator's "soft heart" -- "initially seen by the narrator himself as a sign of Christian strength" -- eventually "is redefined by both the village's medicine man and his own father as a sign of weakness" (93). And this in turn, she argues, leads to the narrator's "ultimate rejection of Christianity and its 'soft heart'" (94). Indeed, in an ironic use of Christian language, Okker suggests, Zitkala-Sa demonstrates the apparent futility of the narrator's Christian faith. "When he goes to kill the cattle, the narrator chooses the 'best-fattened creature' and then returns to his father -- as the prodigal son returning home," she notes. "But he finds no welcome, and the sacrifice of both animal and man is in vain. The father is dead, and the narrator, now a murderer, soon faces his own death" (94). Both Bernardin and Okker, in fact,
read the story's conclusion as Zitkala-Sa's indictment of Christianity in particular.

"Christianity ... has loosened its hold" on the narrator by the story's final scene, argues Bernardin. "[T]he narrator explicitly casts off his 'soft heart' for a 'strong' one," she continues, "and approaches his death with a 'serene and brave calm'" (217). Okker, too, reads these same details as Zitkala-Sa's means of "[s]uggesting how Christianity has failed [the soft-hearted Sioux]" (94).

The suggestion implicit in each of these readings is that the Sioux's now "strong" heart results only and directly at the rejection of Christianity -- indeed, that a "strong" heart is the direct opposite of what is a uniquely "Christian" soft-heartedness. But it would be a misreading of "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" to assume that this rejection also means for the narrator an easy return to tribal culture or a simple reaffirmation of tribal belief. If anything, in fact, the story's ending seems to emphasize the narrator's cultural dislocation. By the story's closing section, that is, the soft-hearted Sioux appears to surrender his position (and his battle) with both cultures at once: he leads his mother back to "the camp of the medicine man" -- a native community no longer his own -- and in turn (to paraphrase his own words), he "gives himself up" to the authorities of white law and is "bound hand and foot" (124). Once a member of each community -- by birth and by belief -- in the end he belongs to neither one.

Arguably, then, even as Zitkala-Sa suggests in her story "how Christianity has failed

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8 Okker here briefly alludes to the New Testament parable of the prodigal son who squandered his inheritance, but who then returned to his father -- poor and repentant -- and was welcomed with "the best robe," shoes for his feet, and a feast of "the fatted calf" (see Luke 15: 11-32). In the Christian tradition, this parable illustrates God's compassion and forgiveness for those who are lost. The father celebrates a repentant son who was "lost" but has now been "found," who was "dead" but has now "come to life." Zitkala-Sa's allusion to this parable, Okker suggests, points to a far different outcome for the Christian-Indian son.
[the soft-hearted Sioux]," she does not in turn offer a clear resolution. Rather, it might be said, she offers a kind of specific non-resolution; and, in this way, the design of her work is similar to that of Lee, Davis, Phelps, and Harper. This non-resolution is perhaps most evident in the soft-hearted Sioux's questioning as he faces death. "I wonder who shall come to welcome me in the realm of strange sight," he asks himself. "Will the loving Jesus grant me pardon and give my soul a soothing sleep? or will my warrior father greet me and receive me as his son?" (124). These are questions left unanswered in and by the story; and yet, the asking of them signals a (re)positioning of the narrator's faith. "Christianity" as a cultural institution has indeed "loosened its hold" on the young Sioux by the story's end; but the intimacy of Christian belief is still a presence. The authority of the Sioux medicine man and tribal culture has also "loosened its hold"; but the familial foundation of tribal belief is still a presence as well. The narrator's now "strong" heart and "serene and brave" soul do not come, then, from choosing one institution or the other, but from choosing neither one or the other. In fact, as the questions themselves intimate, such a choice is simply not available. In the end, the narrator inhabits a fundamentally different space -- a hybrid space, of sorts -- between institutions. And his apparent strength and serenity come from an awareness of this position. At the final moment in which his soul awaits "another flight," that is, the lack of resolution becomes for the narrator a crack in the edifice of cultural institutions -- a fissure that in turn provides an opening for an active faith.

Unquestionably, "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" presents a critique of "Christianity" as a cultural force. To argue, however, that the soft-hearted Sioux rejects Christianity -- or, that
Christianity fails him -- is accurate only if "Christianity" here is understood as a kind of generalized "Christianity of this land," and if the "rejection" of this abstract cultural institution is understood not as a simple choice either "for" or "against," but as a readjustment (or repositioning) of the narrator's relationship to that institution. Zitkala-Sa herself demonstrates through her writing that the rejection of the institution of Christianity does not mean absolute removal from it -- any more than removal from one's tribal community means the erasure of tribal identity. Even by writing a story such as "The Soft-Hearted Sioux," or a later essay defending "Why I Am a Pagan" (1902), Zitkala-Sa demonstrates her ongoing engagement with Christianity as a cultural force. Similarly, the soft-hearted Sioux's final questions -- and their ultimate unanswerability -- reveal an awareness that comes not from transcending the institutions available to him, but from very particular negotiations with those institutions. Like Zitkala-Sa herself, the soft-hearted Sioux lives in a world of conflicting institutional forms. And in this world, liberation comes not from choosing one form over another, but from awareness of one's own positionality.

Given these particular terms, the ultimate purpose of the story is arguably not to decide whether Christianity is "bad" or "good," but rather to question (and to seek) the possibility for belief in a world that has essentially disrupted (even corrupted) belief. In this respect, the central problem of Zitkala-Sa's story is not that the soft-hearted Sioux has become Christian. Rather, the violation of the story is that the "Christianity of this land" has separated the ideas (and ideals) of belief from the Sioux's life and from his larger sense of cultural identity. In particular, Zitkala-Sa's criticism of the "Christianity of this land" in this story is that it does not seem to come from this world as it is. Instead, it seems to be
located alone in the pages of "the white man's Bible" and to operate almost solely in an abstract realm of thoughts turned ever "upward to the sky" (116, 117). Similarly, in "Why I Am a Pagan," she maintains that a religion founded on what she perceives as abstract doctrines, and "some great power" hidden in a "sacred book," is limited by its neglect of the physical world. "I prefer to their dogma my excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of night waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers," she writes (107), revealing belief in the world of experience as a means of discovering the sacred. Thus, the distinction that she makes -- both for herself and for the soft-hearted Sioux -- is a distinction not between institutional forms, but between the culture of belief and the experience of belief.9

While a story like "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" might appear to present a more pronounced (and even more obvious) cultural disparity (between Native American and Anglo-American, between non-Christian and Christian) than the work of Lee, Davis, Phelps, and Harper, Zitkala-Sa is not so far removed from these other writers in her ultimate purpose. Indeed, by recognizing and rejecting "Christianity" as a generalized political and cultural force, and by insisting in turn on the complex (and complicated) nature of the soft-hearted Sioux's individual faith experience through to the end of her story, Zitkala-Sa similarly calls for a more particularized understanding of belief. And by not providing a clear, comfortable resolution to the soft-hearted Sioux's social-spiritual dilemma, Zitkala-Sa similarly challenges her readers' assumptions of how belief functions.

9 "Why I Am a Pagan" originally appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in 1902, and then again in American Indian Stories in 1921. But Spack notes an interesting discrepancy between two versions of American Indian Stories (both published in 1921). "In one, the title of the essay, 'Why I Am a Pagan,' remains the same as in the Atlantic Monthly piece; but in the other it is changed to 'The Great Spirit.' The endings of the two versions also differ." For more detail, see Spack 40n12.
in this world as it is. Like Lee, Davis, Phelps, and Harper, that is, Zitkala-Sa ultimately attempts to rediscover and to rewrite what we mean by faith -- outside of or beyond the generalized notion of "religion" or "Christianity."

Unlike Lee, Davis, Phelps, and Harper, of course, Zitkala-Sa does not make a clear distinction in her story between the "Christianity of this land" and the "Christianity of Christ." In comparison to these other writers' texts, in fact, Zitkala-Sa seems far more skeptical of the possibility of faith within the conceptual framework of "Christianity."

While the spiritual autobiography of a black female preacher like Lee reflects the possibility of finding in Christian conversion and calling an entrance into cultural authority, for instance, Zitkala-Sa's story reflects the increased cultural marginality and uncertain fate even of "Christian Indians" by the early twentieth century. And, in turn, while the texts of women novelists like Phelps and Harper offer revised models of American Christianity that in turn enable revisions of cultural identities, Zitkala-Sa's short story is more uneasily ambiguous along these lines. Still, Zitkala-Sa's critique of "Christianity" as a cultural force serves to re-emphasize the cultural force that the other writers faced. Indeed, her narrative of the soft-hearted Sioux illustrates to early twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers alike that "religion" can and has become a powerful (if generalized) cultural and political institution.

While this seems easy to see in a text like "The Soft-Hearted Sioux," it is perhaps not so clear in a text written from the position of Christian belief. Like Zitkala-Sa, Lee, Davis, Phelps, and Harper each addresses a conflict between opposing forms of identity; more specifically, each addresses a conflict between opposing cultural modes of perceiving and
understanding the relation between human and divine, secular and sacred. And yet, the
difference -- and the difficulty -- in these other writers' texts is that the opposing cultural
positions and forms of identity have the same name: "Christian." For many scholars, this
becomes a sticking point. Indeed, the Christianity that has "loosened its hold" on the soft­
hearted Sioux by the end of Zitkala-Sa's story -- and, by turns, the generalized,
institutional "Christianity of this land" that has also "loosened its hold" in the texts by Lee,
Davis, Phelps, and Harper -- is arguably the very "Christianity" that still has a hold on
scholars who perceive it only as an oppressive cultural force. The texts themselves,
however, insist upon an understanding of Christianity that is at once more complex and
specific. Though the distinctions of faith may not appear as clear as they seem in Zitkala­
Sa's story, in fact, the other writers' texts call for a similarly distinct understanding. Like
Zitkala-Sa, the women writers in the preceding chapters identify and challenge the cultural
institution of Christianity as ineffectual, inadequate, even corrupt (and corrupting). And,
like Zitkala-Sa, they can, in response, offer only a partial resolution -- or carefully crafted
non-resolution -- that points to the need for cultural reform. Still, like Zitkala-Sa too, they
each signal a reform that proceeds from belief -- belief that is individualized, particular, and
continually shaped both by and against other cultural forces.

If there is a common thread that links these women writers, then, it is that each
understands and articulates faith as a dynamic process -- an active attempt to act with belief
that often places them at odds with a world for which "religion" is a settled (and often
static) institution. Each raises the question in her writing of how belief can work in an
increasingly industrial and capitalist world -- the world as it is, as opposed to some ideal of
the world that abstracts this reality. And though none is in a position to resolve this

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dilemma, each identifies the need for an ongoing -- if variable -- spiritual quest among her readers. Indeed, though the quest is similar among these writers, how they approach it is as variable as the positions they come from. These are women who are positioned differently -- both from each other, and through the varying cultural forces each must negotiate in order to make faith a possibility. They are therefore women of fundamentally different faith positions. To merely apply to them an abstract or generalized label, then -- in fact, to simply call them "religious" or even "Christian" -- does not begin to describe them. Once we have identified that they are Christian, we must then ask how they are Christian.

In focusing on Lee, Davis, Phelps, and Harper in particular, I do not mean to suggest in the end that all American writers are Christian (or should be); nor do I mean to suggest that all scholars should approach religion through a specifically Christian framework. What I do mean to emphasize, though, is that these particular writers are Christian, and that they therefore require an approach appropriate to their specific beliefs and to the methods that follow from those beliefs. Zitkala-Sa's story of the soft-hearted Sioux illustrates the damage that can be done when we insist upon a mode of understanding that is inappropriate for its subject. It is important, then, that we apply this insight to the full variety of religious experience and expression represented in these texts. Both individually and collectively, these women writers demonstrate that religious identity and cultural identity are inseparable; they should remind us as scholars, then, that religious sensibility and cultural analysis are inseparable as well. In turn, these writers demonstrate that the rejection of the "Christianity of this land" as a cultural institution is not an absolute or even necessary conclusion within itself, but rather the beginning of other possibilities of belief. They should therefore serve
as a reminder to scholars, too, that faith can be an analytic framework rather than simply a liability. These writers and their texts, in fact, provide a framework for looking yet again at writers we have looked at before. Using this framework, we can discover -- in some cases, for the first time -- what it means to say that "this is a religious writer," or "this is a religious work."
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