

**THE ENDS OF LITERACY EDUCATION: EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTISM AND  
THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY WRITING  
INSTRUCTION**

by

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This dissertation examines stories of transformation integral to representations of nineteenth-century American evangelical literacy instruction: transformations of literacy students into Christians and transformations of literate Christians into critics of authority. In particular, I describe how nineteenth-century evangelical literacy education was represented as a powerful engine of change for the literacy student and the student's community in novels, letter writing manuals, and tract society literature. As I read these texts, the historical representations of evangelical literacy instruction present this instruction as a two-step process of transformation in which, first, the student is transformed and, second, the student affects transformations on the people in his/her community. In unearthing these stories of transformation I am able to construct an overlooked history in which literacy and the literary intertwine with evangelical Protestantism. This history is valuable not only for what it tells us about the past, but it also sheds light on the assumptions we make today about the transformative potential of literacy education. I demonstrate, for instance, that these narratives of transformation have present-day analogues in secular, scholarly debates about transforming composition students into activists and policy-makers. In particular, I examine the metaphors and narratives composition scholars use to characterize the means by which composition courses are thought to prepare students to engage with "public" spheres.

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## PREFACE

The experience of writing this dissertation certainly impressed on me that no one accomplishes much of anything without the tremendous support of her community. I am very grateful to the different communities that have supported me through this project; this completed dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine. First, I need to thank my incredible committee. My chair, Kathryn Flannery, has been a true and generous guide. As such she has asked the right questions at the right time, stood back and allowed me to come to my own questions, and taught me that each intellectual project contains varied possibilities to explore. Steve Carr was one of the first professors at the University of Pittsburgh to see in me the potential to do this work. His early encouragement was essential for me to recognize my own abilities. He is an amazing reader, teacher, and friend. Nancy Glazener -- also an amazing reader with an astonishing intellect -- taught me how to be rigorous and inquisitive as a scholar. (She is also a lovely human being.) I am also grateful to Donna Strickland whose effort to bridge composition and cultural studies through her work on gender and labor has been an important model for me as I set-out to develop my own methods of inquiry.

I was lucky to be part of a community of graduate students who were supportive, generous, and wacky at the appropriate times. In particular I would like to thank Tara Lockhart who has been a true comrade. I would also like to thank Manisha and Anustup Basu whose house was like a university annex, minus the stringent anti-smoking laws. Chris Warnick was

something like my guy Friday – always there with advice, support, and the often-needed reality check. I would also like to express my gratitude to my two dissertation reading groups: Chris Warnick, Maggie Rehm, Tara Lockhart, Jean Grace, Julie Parrish, Kirsten Strayer, Christine Feldman, Kara Andersen, Molly Brown, Amy Borden, and Amanda Klein.

Even though my Dad was afraid graduate school would drop me at the Home Depot for a lifetime of key making, his encouragement, as well as my mother's, taught me to value education and the risk of pursuing what you desire. Finally, there's no way I could have come this far without my partner, Amy Borden. These last few months, especially, she's fed and clothed me and acted as a valuable sounding board. I can't imagine having done this without her.



## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

“‘I think I am changed,’ she said to herself at last. ‘I didn’t use to like to read the Bible, and now I do very much; -- I never liked praying in old times, and now, oh, what should I do without it!— I didn’t love Jesus at all, but I am sure I do now. I don’t keep his commandments, but I do *try* to keep them; -- I *must* be changed a little.’”

--Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, 352.

“I want to promote particular values; I want to feel, with classical rhetoricians such as Isocrates and Quintilian, that I am shaping *good* people by my instruction.”

--Patricia Bizzell, *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, 282

“The preparation of students in technical and professional communication for civic engagement presumes their participation in social action as citizens but also perhaps as professionals employed for their expertise in communication . . .”

--Carolyn Rude, “Toward an Expanded Concept of Rhetorical Delivery: The Uses of Reports in Public Policy Debates,” 271.

Nineteenth-century American evangelicalism would seem a world apart from modern scholarly debates about how to teach reading and writing to college students. Yet, these two worlds share an emphasis on the transformative potential of literacy instruction which suggests that these two worlds are more closely linked than would be apparent at first blush. If we

recognize that “literacy instruction has always taken place with a substantive context of values” (de Castell and Luke 159), perhaps we can further recognize a genetic tracing from nineteenth-century depictions of students transformed into Christians to modern claims about transforming students into “good people” or socially active citizens as in the epigrams above.

The relationship between evangelical Protestantism and the development of American literacy education has been commonly represented as serving restrictive, conservative impulses – evangelical Protestant literacy campaigns, for instance, are supposed to have sought to contain potential class antagonisms, to impose nationalism, and to assert the superiority of Protestantism (*see* H. Graff, Soltow and Stevens). Certainly these claims are often compelling; however, the history I construct suggests that arguments about the conservatism of evangelical Protestant literacy only reveal half of the story. If we look at evangelical literacy as it is represented in multiple sites of cultural production -- tracts, novels, autobiographies, letter writing manuals -- we see that this literacy education is represented as both disciplinary *and* empowering, as a technology of the self that at once recommends self-abnegation *and* offers the means with which to exercise power in the public sphere.

Evangelical literacy, as it is constructed in nineteenth-century depictions of reading and writing instruction, is a means through which a student enacts devotion to God through reading and writing practices which demand self-abnegation and service toward others. This dual orientation marks the importance of transforming the self and transforming others in American evangelical Protestantism. The connection between nineteenth-century constructions of evangelical literacy and “public activism” opens up questions about historical constructions of the nineteenth-century public sphere – why, for instance, have churches and schools (and other sites of education) often been collapsed into a private sphere? What do these historical

constructions tell us about our beliefs about virtue, literacy, and public efficacy today? Nineteenth-century texts which include extensive depictions of reading and writing instruction are fruitful ground for exploring these questions. In this sense, narrative scenes of evangelical literacy instruction provide the occasion for bringing the concerns of literacy studies into dialogue with the concerns of literary studies.

For post-colonial sons and daughters the nineteenth century bristled with threats to the moral health of the nation, and literacy was a central field of battle for these believers.<sup>1</sup> By the early nineteenth-century both the Bible and denominational catechisms, which had been dominant texts for literacy education, were superseded by a burgeoning textbook industry and secular press (Gutjahr 119).<sup>2</sup> The 1820s were a time of upheaval for Protestants: proponents of liberal and conservative doctrines struggled for dominance (Ahlstrom 397) while evangelical congregations swelled through periodic revivals. Furthermore, what Ahlstrom calls the Protestant “quasi-establishment” came under increasing pressure through the century from religious minorities, including Catholics and Mormons and other homegrown belief systems (382). National, non-denominational Protestant societies, like the American Sunday School Union (ASSU) and the American Tract Society (ATS), formed in the 1820s as efforts to unite and redeem the nation; these organizations were part of an evangelical movement focused on “moral renewal, missionary advance, and humanitarian reform” (387).<sup>3</sup>

The formation of these Protestant evangelical organizations dedicated to promoting literacy testifies to the extent to which Protestant self-definition depended on reading and writing. Of course, literacy was indispensable to the Protestant Reformation, which was in many ways a reader’s revolution. Early American Protestants emphasized the centrality of literacy to Protestant practices; colonial legislation mandating literacy education has led David Paul Nord to

suggest that colonial New England was “perhaps the most literate place on earth” (14). Nineteenth-century evangelical approaches to literacy were shaped, in part, by Puritan and evangelical traditions that emphasized, among other things, “Reformation doctrines of *sola scriptura*” and the priesthood of believers (Nord, *Faith* 14). For the heirs of the Reformation, reading was the means through which the individual superseded the priesthood (Brown 3).<sup>4</sup> The leaders of the ATS and ASSU acted on the Reformation inheritance, the belief that “the printed word was the vital means of grace”; and thus, for those involved with these Protestant literacy organizations, “[t]he problem of America was ignorance (religious and otherwise) and knowledge was the cure” (Nord, *Faith* 81).

From roughly 1820 to 1860, the boundaries between religious and secular constructions of literacy were highly porous. Publishers and booksellers, for instance, produced and sold both secular and religious texts (Blodgett 14). Likewise, seemingly “secular” schoolbooks included Protestant catechisms and other religious material. This period is also significant because national organizations, such as the American Tract Society, the American Bible Society, and the American Sunday School Union, entered the publishing business in order to build and sustain an evangelical culture of literacy. As measured by church membership, the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed expanding involvement in organized religion: church membership rose from 17% in 1776 to 37% in 1860 (Noll, “Evangelical” 271). Evangelical discourse permeated American life as evangelical efforts to proselytize captured more and more souls for Protestant churches.

Nineteenth-century evangelicalism should not be understood as a unified movement, however, but as a set of beliefs and practices organized around salvation and mission. Evangelicalism drove campaigns for spiritual transformation at the personal, community, and,

indeed, national levels. In this way, nineteenth-century evangelicalism filled the anxiety felt by some as a consequence of the absence of an established religion, insisting that the seemingly “private” realm of conscience and belief penetrate all aspects of society.

Evangelicalism is a notoriously difficult concept to stably define (Blodgett 5), since the term can be made to accommodate a variety of political and social purposes.<sup>5</sup> However, I have found Mark Noll’s “core elements” and George Marsden’s “unifying criteria” useful for identifying the defining beliefs which characterize nineteenth-century Protestant evangelicalism. Noll writes that

First, evangelicals throughout the North Atlantic were determined Protestants who took [sic] with particular earnestness the historic Protestant attachment to Scripture. They could differ wildly among themselves on the meaning of the Bible, but the Scriptures remained a bedrock of authority. Second, evangelicals shared a conviction that true religion required the active experience of God. Again, evangelicals prescribed myriad norms for that experience and even more ways for accommodating the experience of God with reason, traditions, and hierarchies. (Revolution 129)

Noll’s definition stresses that nineteenth-century evangelicalism can include a variety of particular theological beliefs. As Noll points out, even as Biblical authority is central to evangelicalism, individual evangelicals could differ among themselves about how to interpret the Bible.

Because the Bible occupies a central place in evangelicalism and Protestantism more generally, literacy education and the accompanying ability to read and interpret scripture are also

central to an evangelical life as underscored by the five criteria Marsden identifies as necessary for distinguishing Protestant evangelicalism from related forms of Protestantism:

‘(1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelicalism and mission, and (5) the importance of the spiritually transformed life.’ (*qtd* in Blodgett 5)

Evangelical Protestantism is fundamentally a reader’s religion in that reading the Bible is a basic component of this religious practice. The profound importance of the Bible as a source of God’s “saving work” links the evangelical responsibility to bear the responsibilities of mission and living a “spiritually transformed life” to literacy. This linkage is testified to not only by the evangelical emphasis on individual readers recognizing the “final authority of the Bible” but also by the emphasis on distributing texts in evangelical missionary activities.

The interwoven emphasis on evangelicalism and the spiritually-transformed life are especially important to understanding the nineteenth-century tracts, novels, and letter-writing manuals which include representations of evangelical literacy instruction. These works teach the reader that a spiritually-transformed life demands that the student share her spiritual-literacy education with others and/or stand as a moral exemplar. For nineteenth-century evangelicals a Biblical life demanded complex literacy skills, and these literacy activities were key to “the active experience of God” as Noll calls it (129).

In this study, “literacy” is understood to be a “a shorthand for [a culture’s] social practices and conceptions of reading and writing” (Street 1). By recognizing that conceptualizations of literacy are embedded in cultural contexts, we further recognize that any

reading and writing activity is also a value-laden interpretative activity. The “conceptions” of evangelical reading and writing activities depicted in scenes of literacy instruction position literacy as what Street would call a socialization in evangelical values (2). Literacy historians frequently characterize the socialization embedded in nineteenth-century constructions of Protestant or evangelical literacy as repressive (*see* H. Graff). Catherine Hobbs claims, for instance, that

The use of basic literacy as a means of social control, which began with Sunday schools and religious tract societies after the English model, had made inroads by the time of the Revolution and stood ready to ease the upcoming shift to industrial and commercial capital in North America. (8-9)

Hobbs is of course correct that, particularly in Britain, the Sunday school movement was linked rhetorically with “social control” by some movement apologists and that evangelical literacy education could have the effect of redirecting discontent and training workers. However, much is lost if we limit ourselves to these preconceptions about the aims of and values demonstrated by evangelical constructions of literacy. Thus while Hobbs argues that literacy was “a key element in the social transformation to Victorian culture and the Cult of True Womanhood, with its tenets of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness . . . including the existing imbrications of literacy and morality” (10), I find that these same tenets, particularly piety and submissiveness, are represented as also paradoxically empowering the female literacy student to confront institutions and figures of authority.

In this way, evangelical constructions of literacy cannot be reduced to simply the means through which students were socialized to become Protestant drones. Because literacy is culturally constructed, “writing and reading” are activities which are “dynamic and changing and

not fully under the control of any group or agency” (Flannery “Concepts” 86). By recognizing that the values of evangelical Protestantism are contested and complicated in representations of evangelical literacy instruction, we remind ourselves that culture, even what might be called evangelical culture, is, in James Clifford’s words, “‘contested, temporal and emergent’” (*qtd* in Flannery 90).

I have sought to describe the complicated topography of evangelical constructions of literacy by examining narrative scenes of literacy instruction in nineteenth-century texts. Extensive representations of literacy instruction often appear in texts in which characters are motivated by a desire for religious education. These depictions of literacy instruction are manifested as discussions about the use of or need for education; as scenes in which characters interpret texts together; or as narrativizations of teaching. Analyzing the assumptions fueling these representations as well as the role these scenes of literacy instruction play in the texts reveals that evangelical literacy practices were linked to values as seemingly dissimilar as submission and defiance.

Evangelical literacy in these representations requires a pedagogy which functions as a kind of “technology of the self,” a means through which “‘a human being turns him – or herself into a subject’” – in this case an evangelical Protestant subject (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 3). For Michel Foucault literacy practices are at the heart of technologies of the self; he describes, for instance, a Hellenistic tradition of “‘taking care of oneself’” “‘linked to constant writing activity’” (“Technologies” 27) According to Foucault, the self became “‘something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity’” (27) which in the first and second centuries of the common era evolved into a relationship between “‘writing and vigilance’” as “[a]ttention was paid to nuance of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and



widened by virtue of this act of writing” (28). In this formulation, Foucault reminds us that discipline is at once constraining and enabling.

Representations of literacy education focus the student’s attention on transforming herself into a submissive and dutiful Christian. In this version of Christianity, “Christian morality . . . makes self-renunciation the condition for salvation,” and literacy activities become part of what Foucault calls “the new technology of the self” -- a means of meeting the demands of developing and monitoring the Christian self, which through self-renunciation becomes “a sacrifice of the self” (“Technologies” 45). Furthermore, we can understand this technology of the self to be a mode through which the individual relates to society with literacy activities as the bridge between the individual and society. Thus, representations of literacy instruction focus on producing dutiful and submissive Christians through literacy activities. This evangelical technology of the self is a version of what Noll calls evangelical “discipline” (Revolution 130). Importantly, however, inherent to this discipline, according to Noll, is “a common evangelical conviction that the gospel compelled a search for social healing as well as personal holiness” (Revolution 130).

The key to this evangelical conviction is the emphasis on transformation. Through particular reading practices the self is transformed into a self-abnegating Christian authorized through this self-abnegation to participate in broader civic discourse. Evangelical literacy positions students as both responsible for maintaining positions of humility and submission and as responsible for defying immoral authority. What Noll calls “personal holiness” and “a search for social healing,” I call the transformation of the student and the transformed student seeking to transform his or her community. These two kinds of transformation are central to the description of the evangelical literacy developed through the chapters of this dissertation. It is the second

form of transformation, in particular, emphasized by the evangelical constructions of literacy that suggests how the evangelical literacy students depicted by these texts participate in civic life.

By referring to the qualities and responsibilities associated with the student and, more broadly, literacy education as comprising an “evangelical literacy,” I signal that these qualities and responsibilities are not dictated by individual authoritative figures but constructed and produced through a network of representations that link literacy to an evangelical perspective. The three groups of historical texts, tracts, novels and autobiographies, and letter-writing manuals, share particular ways of representing the purposes and value of literacy education; these representations are informed by evangelical societies’ discourses about literacy, and they also shape these discourses in turn.

Evangelical constructions of literacy spring from a worldview that does not recognize a distinction between a “private” realm of morality and virtue and a “public” realm of commerce. Scott E. Casper suggests that, thanks in part to evangelical Christianity, “[a]t the same time that habits – increasingly, private habits – came to define one’s character (true self), they were also seen to determine one’s success or failure in public, at least in the rhetoric of character formation preached by ministers, advice manuals, and biographies” (6-7). What Casper calls “private habits” are in fact understood by evangelicals as integral to the public sphere.

The complex relationship between public and private in scenes of literacy instruction is related to the struggles for nineteenth-century American churches and religions to negotiate their relationships to the quasi-secular public spaces of American governance and commerce. The hinge point that connects the two sites of concern is the development, nurturance, and enactment of moral conscience as a social responsibility. The literacy student in these texts is a steward of Protestant moral consciousness for a larger cultural milieu – she or, less commonly, he stands as

an exemplar, a public figure who exerts moral suasion. In the novels, for example, evangelical literacy practices provided ways for disenfranchised characters in novels to use individual transformation as currency with which they can attempt to transform the “publics” and “proto-publics” they belong to: home, community, and nation. Evangelical literacy, therefore, functions as a kind of alchemy, transforming private religious conscience into the public authority to challenge religious and political institutions as well as hierarchal organizations of power.

By recognizing that the writers participating in discussions about evangelical literacy are working, consciously, in a tradition of “radical Protestant dissent,” we can also see that these religiously-inflected scenes of literacy instruction submit arguments about politics and nation authorized through a kind of moral authority. Armstrong claims that “an old tradition of Protestant dissent [argues] that political authority should be based on moral superiority” (18). This moral authority, tied as it is to literacy activities, exercises power through the production of discourses of truth – and power, as Foucault has demonstrated in his work, is neither simply constraining nor simply enabling (Foucault *Discipline* 26-28).

I had initially thought that this dual orientation of the technology of the self embedded in the evangelical constructions of literacy would allow me to usefully deconstruct the binary relationship between the public and private that has persisted in some characterizations of schooling. Excavating the connections between literacy instruction which transforms students and literacy students who transform families, local communities, and even national communities reveals the limitations of overlaying the public/domestic binary onto nineteenth-century representations of literacy education.

For example, because women are frequently represented in these scenes of instruction and because these scenes are often set in homes, education, like religion, is all too often confined

by literary critics to the domestic sphere.<sup>6</sup> The presumptions that activities in the domestic sphere are hermetically sealed off from the public sphere can blind some critics to the representations of women, children, educators, and clergy as participants in conversations about public issues. James Emmett Ryan is characteristic of this myopic viewpoint when he claims that

the blurred boundaries between home and church play a prominent role in popular nineteenth-century sentimental fictions, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Susan Warner's hugely popular *The Wide, Wide World*. In the latter novel, published in 1850 and reprinted through the end of the nineteenth century, tearful and sobbing female sympathy provides the steady accompaniment to a didactic tale featuring Protestant female self-denial and the forceful construction of a rigid domestic sphere. Home and church both provide representational spaces for a range of sentimental experiences. (87)

In formulations such as this one, churches and the home, the sites where scenes of literacy instruction are frequently set, are squarely located within “a rigid domestic sphere” presumably because women dominate these spaces. Likewise, Sarah Robbins's attention to representations of literacy in American literature falls into the trap set by the ease with which an ideology of separate spheres seems to graft onto nineteenth-century literature. Her insistence on qualifying “literacy narratives” with “domestic” obscures the complicated interpenetration of public and private domains in these literacy narratives. Equating supposedly-feminized ways of navigating the world – through religion, sympathy, and sentiment -- with domesticity radically constricts our ability to read the complicated ways literacy narratives position students, including women, as actors in the world.

The home, the school, and the church, then, occupy a space which should be understood as both in and in-between private and public realms; Nina Baym points out that the “public sphere” must be understood as a metaphor and that “public and private were different ways of behaving in the same sphere” (*American* 11). However, the centrifugal force of the public/private binary renders it difficult to adequately describe the both/and relationship between the “private” religious or ethical conscience of the individual and her discursive participation in “public” issues.

It may be more useful to think of characters in novels, tracts, and other literature as participating in civil society, as defined by Carolyn Elliott as

a space between the family and the state where people associate across ties of kinship, aside from the market, and independent of the state. It includes both relatively formal organizations and the informal array of friendship and networks of social life outside the family. It is the arena of community meetings and street corner activity, clubs and churches, *sabhas* and *samajs*, professional associations and unions, social movement and community action groups. (8)

Conceptualizing “a space between” the family and the state opens our eyes to many ways that individuals participate in shaping their world. This civic sphere, the “space between,” allows us to recognize the ways that friendships, “networks of social life,” and organizations such as churches engage, interpret, critique, and shape public issues.

By including affective relationships such as friendships in the civic sphere, Elliott further allows us to imagine that there are affective ways of contributing to public discourse. This gets us around the problem created by insisting that for discourse to participate within a “public” sphere it must be based on a particular version of “reason” which is often used to essentially

“privatize” arguments based on morality or other ways of knowing, such as those dismissed as affective or “sentimental.” Geoff Eley’s description of the public sphere, for example, identifies “a clear distinction between public good and private interest, the principled demarcation of state and society, and the constitutive role of a participant citizenry defining public policy and its parameters through reasoned exchange” (293-94). The utopist goal of “reasoned exchange” by definition is particularly out of reach for the African-American men, women, and children and the white women and children represented as part of asymmetrical power relations in the texts I read in this study. The possibility of reasoned public exchange can be hijacked by the refusal to recognize a group or individual’s ability to reason.

Reading early and mid-nineteenth century texts through a frame of a binary opposition between public and private spheres superimposes distinct boundaries onto texts which do not construct such boundaries. Partially, this problem arises from metaphors. The metaphors available for describing the nineteenth-century position of women offer competing landscapes for women’s activities. The concept of Republican Motherhood, for example, which took root after the Revolution as a way to conceptualize women’s contribution to the *civic* work of educating a democratic populace, rests uneasily in a separate domestic sphere. Women were never stably confined to a domestic bubble partially because the domestic space was never fully domestic if by “domestic” we mean sheltered from the issues and responsibilities of civic life. Baym argues, for instance, that “the domestic sphere” was “a work site fully participant in public life” (*American* 12), since the domestic or private sphere was the “place where citizens and citizenship were produced” (6).

In fact, it often seems as though the definitive quality of the “public sphere” in much nineteenth-century literary criticism is the presumed absence of women. In this way, women can

never participate within a public sphere because by definition any site where women are influential is associated with the domestic sphere. Nan Johnson, for example, argues that women “found themselves stranded in the parlor with little hope of securing a voice in public affairs” because “a conservative agenda based on gender is an obvious part of the successful promotion of rhetorical literacy throughout the nineteenth century” (14). The “stranded” women Johnson identifies are passive victims – they “find themselves” -- of a conservative rhetorical literacy agenda. As I seek to demonstrate in this study, women are often represented in scenes of literacy instruction as active shapers of both their parlours and of the broader communities they belong to, particularly in the scenes of evangelical literacy instruction I study here. If we imagine that spaces, such as the parlour or the schoolroom, are never hermetically sealed away from public discourses, we can recognize that female characters are often represented as participating in public discourses about nationalism and the moral direction of the nation.

The flaws in the thinking produced by the public/private binary are revealed by careful dissections of the meanings embedded in the “public sphere.” Nancy Fraser writes that when the “public sphere” is “used . . . to refer to everything that is outside the domestic or familiar sphere . . . this usage conflates at least three analytically distinct things: the state, the official economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse” (2). For instance, if we define the public sphere as the arena in which labor is exchanged for money, plenty of nineteenth-century texts represent women as participating in this sphere, even entering into these exchanges within domestic spaces.

Alternately, if we define the public sphere via Jurgen Habermas as the arena in which individuals negotiate with each other about issues of common concern through print, representations of women as correspondents and writers position women as participants within a

public sphere.<sup>7</sup> Instead of defining the work of literacy instruction in the texts I read as circumscribed by the physical locations in which they are set, I explore to what extent literacy students participate in discourses about “public” topics: slavery, economic relations, class, national religious institutions, and national identity. Recognizing that the ways individuals are represented as negotiating economic relations has allowed me to identify the ways that women, in particular, participated in a civic sphere in the extent to which they sought to change their social and economic positions.

The attention nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals pay, for instance, to women who exchange labor for money demands that these letters engage with business that, yes, is “personal” to the extent that it has to do with the individual, but is also engaged with the economic sphere. Likewise, letters which represent middle-class mothers recommending literacy activities which shape evangelical Protestant practice are also engaged with shaping the values of the civic sphere. This reading is starkly different from Johnson’s reading of the rhetorical possibilities open to women in the nineteenth century. Johnson writes that

Narrowly defining the discursive field of women’s correspondence as ranging from social letters to personal business, nineteenth-century letter-writing literature generally reinforced conservative definitions of female roles rather than expanding the rhetorical territory of women. (79)

Johnson finds the “discursive field of women’s correspondence” “narrow” because she does not conceptualize women’s “social letters” and “personal business” as participating in a world outside of the parlour.

That women’s correspondence should be understood as participating in a world beyond the parlour is attested to by Lisa Gring-Pemble who writes that “[i]n the context of the early



woman's rights movement, sustained correspondence served as one form of alternative public space of great importance" (58). By seeing the potential for sustained correspondence between women as shaping an "alternative public space," Gring-Pemble recognizes that Habermasian public sphere theory depends on individuals exchanging and negotiating ideas and claims about values through the medium of print. After all, Habermas builds his version of the public sphere partially on correspondence. Fraser's feminist revision and extension of Habermas's theory allows us to recognize that both "official" correspondence societies and informal correspondence networks can be understood as building public spheres, particularly what Fraser calls "subaltern counterpublics" (14).

Thus, we should not presume that women's correspondence represented in both mid-nineteenth-century novels and letter-writing manuals are strictly limited to a private or domestic sphere. As I suggested above, the metaphor of the civic sphere as a space between the state and the family might be a useful way of recognizing the participation of disenfranchised figures, particularly women, in shaping discourses about religion, class, race, gender, and national identity. This civic space between might be conceptualized as incorporating multiple civics or publics which overlap or bump against each other. Fraser's concept of the "subaltern counterpublic" is particularly useful for recognizing that for individuals to participate in civic discourse they don't need to be necessarily engaged with a broad, general public. Subaltern counterpublics are both withdrawn from and engaged with broader, national discourses. They are sites in which individuals united around a particular experience or issue, who have little opportunity to affect national discourse in a traditional sense, nonetheless frame their experiences and issues through exchange among themselves.

These counterpublics then potentially affect broader public discourses through an almost viral pattern. Recognizing both the inadequacy of the public/private binary as a descriptor of the evangelical literacy and the possibilities opened up by reimaginings of public discourses by theorists such as Elliott and Fraser, suggests the direction for future work. A writing pedagogy which is invested in exploring, for instance, the terrain in which students and teachers map the writing done in the composition classroom is an occasion for investigating the desirability and theorizing the possibilities for positioning the writing done as part of a course to participate in discursive arenas beyond the classroom. The key to this work is to critically analyze the ways the student is constructed as participant in civic life through particular writing pedagogies. As a first step in this analysis, I examine the similarities between nineteenth-century narratives which have cast the literacy student in the role of transformed and transforming evangelical Protestant and current narratives which cast the professional writing student in the role of transformed and transforming progressive citizen.

The three groups of nineteenth-century texts discussed in the following chapters move out in concentric circles from a central, organized campaign to construct an evangelical culture of literacy. The scenes of literacy instruction in tracts published by the American Tract Society in chapter two make evident the qualities associated with literacy by a missionary, interdenominational education campaign aimed at ministering to the moral health of the nation. The texts in the third chapter, “sentimental” fiction by white women writers and autobiographies and novels by African American women writers, complicate the understanding of the evangelical literacy produced through the tracts. These texts, for instance, adapt the discourse of literate and religious duty which appears in the tracts while also underscoring the ways this discourse empowers disenfranchised characters to confront figures of authority. The texts in the fourth

chapter, letter-writing manuals, seem at first to be the most removed from the American evangelical literacy campaigns, particularly as the material in these texts is often recycled from eighteenth-century British manuals. Nonetheless these manuals, particularly those which are American-authored or Americanized, also depict the interrelationship between literacy and religious duty and submission. Finally, I turn to contemporary practices.

In chapter two, “Evangelical Literacy: American Tract Society Literature and Constructions of Literacy,” I examine the scenes of literacy instruction in tracts published by the American Tract Society. In this chapter I suggest that these scenes represent evangelical literacy instruction as both disciplinary and empowering, both humbling students and authorizing these students to transform their families and communities in pious Christians.

Chapter three, “Literacy Education as Conversion Pedagogy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Literature” sketches in more detail about the technology of the self represented in scenes of evangelical literacy instruction. This chapter focuses on mid-nineteenth-century novels and autobiographies by women. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Paul Gutjahr, Jane Tompkins, and Candy Gunther Brown, I read texts such as Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig; Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) as participating in a vital evangelical culture. The representations of evangelical literacy instruction in these texts both promote self-abnegation and authorize politically-powerless characters to critique, resist, and amend laws, doctrines, and ideologies. The emphasis on authorizing the literacy student to challenge institutions and figures of authority in these texts allows us to see that the technology of the self embedded in the evangelical constructions of literacy I discuss here is more complex than we might assume if we read tracts alone as representative of this culture.

The texts in chapter four, “Model Letters, Model Lessons: Letter-Writing Manuals and Virtuous Character,” are the most removed of the historical texts I discuss from evangelical literacy campaigns. Nonetheless, as I demonstrate in this chapter, letter-writing manuals make claims about evangelical literacy to the extent that the representations of literacy instruction and literacy activities in both the instructions for the manuals and the model letters in the manuals position the literacy student as engaged with the technology of the self that I describe in the previous chapters. In this chapter I turn to letter-writing manuals to describe more fully how the construction and maintenance of a virtuous Christian self is positioned in the first half of the nineteenth century as a project that cuts across distinctions between public and private spheres.

This chapter is a bridge between the nineteenth-century representations of evangelical literacy instruction and the modern-day representations of the transformative potential of public-oriented professional writing pedagogies that I discuss in chapter five. Letter-writing manuals are a bridge genre in this project because letters and letter writing are important literacy activities both in the nineteenth-century novels and in modern professional writing curricula.

In chapter 5, “Public-Oriented Writing Pedagogy: Narratives of Transformation and Citizenship,” I turn to the present day with the questions that motivated my historical work to further ask what contemporary narratives of duty and empowerment advanced about literacy students and education tell us about the culture from which these narratives emerge. In particular, I examine the metaphors and narratives composition scholars use to characterize the means by which composition courses are thought to prepare students to engage with “public” spheres. Because I am specifically interested in connections between literacy instruction and participation in public discourses, I focus on discussions about two kinds of courses that are identified with the “public turn” in composition: public-oriented writing courses and professional

writing courses. In particular, I focus on discussions about these courses which theorize transforming students to transform communities. It is this emphasis on transformation which connects contemporary claims about the work of composition to the historical literacy narratives which represent the transformations of literacy students into Christians empowers to transform the people and communities around them.

The parallels between nineteenth-century representations of evangelical literacy instruction and modern claims about the transformative work of public-oriented writing pedagogy suggest that the writing classroom may be a productive space in which teachers and students can explore the possibilities of contributing to discourses that transgress across the divide between experience and theory; faith and reason; religion and secularism. The history of evangelical literacy prompts us to examine how writing students are positioned within current claims about transformative potential of literacy pedagogy, particularly professional and publicly-oriented composition pedagogies.

One of the most interesting twists in this work for me has been my realization that there is something downright evangelical about current claims in composition studies about transforming communities and the world through public writing pedagogies. Many claims are advanced about the transformations intended for the community while scant attention is paid to the ways such pedagogies position students as material to be transformed in turn. The nineteenth-century constructions of evangelical literacy I describe in the following chapters has left me with a series of questions about the assumptions that underwrite contemporary “transformative” literacy pedagogies, which I begin to address in my final chapter.

As the cultural influence of modern-day fundamentalist evangelical Protestants, particularly those affiliated with the ascendant right-wing political movement, has grown over

the last thirty years, a few composition scholars have attempted to think about how composition, and literary studies generally, should respond to this cultural phenomena. James Moffett, for instance, presents religious and literary education as mirror opposites (117). Moffett asks, “Has English teaching extended religious teaching in a secular way?” (117). Moffett’s answer would be affirmative to the extent to which literary and literacy education can, like religious education, potentially affect identity and ethics. I go a step further in this project, suggesting that public-oriented composition pedagogies today contain many traces of a nineteenth-century evangelical literacy. These traces provoke important questions both about composition pedagogies but also about what, if anything, composition studies can contribute to the growing rhetorical distance between secular and fundamentalist evangelical ways of knowing. I have begun to explore the significance of these traces in my discussion of the “secular evangelicalism” of public-oriented writing pedagogies in chapter five.

Other questions remain to be explored. In particular, the discursive and epistemological distance that may accompany the relationships between a student’s world view which has been shaped by fundamentalist religions and her more secular peers and teachers reflects a similar disjunction in American public discourse. Lizabeth Rand claims that composition teachers “may be more at ease when evangelical religious talk remains a private form of expression” (357). It is difficult to assess the accuracy of Rand’s suspicion, but it does remind us that today, as in the past, religious discourse is only uneasily and unsuccessfully remanded to the “private sphere.”

The fallacy of the private-ness of religious ways of knowing and religious discourses is one of the myths that seem to be required to maintain a pluralistic, liberal state. How, after all, is the civic sphere to operate if it is reduced to contestation between opposing faith-based truth claims? Writing classrooms can be the laboratories for exploring ways to address such

complicated questions -- not by tackling them head on, necessarily, but by taking as a central inquiry the ways opposing conceits are interwoven: theory and experience, reason and faith, public and private. In the end, this project itself is such an inquiry in that it seeks to engage productively with an alien discourse, of finding traces of a nineteenth-century evangelical literacy in not just contemporary, secular writing instruction but in professional writing pedagogy.

## 2.0 EVANGELICAL LITERACY: AMERICAN TRACT SOCIETY LITERATURE AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF LITERACY

“He was serious and attentive while at school, and as soon as he had learned to read, would spend the Sabbath evenings in reading the books which his teacher had given him; and would often relate a considerable part of the content of these and other little books to his parents, expressing the wish that he was like those of whom he had read.”

-- “Memoir of James M’Corkle,” 48.3-4.<sup>8</sup>

In 1850 the American Tract Society published a collection of stories for and about children called *“I am afraid I have a soul”, and other books for children*. Although all of the stories stress the necessity of children tending to their souls, three of the eight stories are of particular interest because they emphasize the importance of literacy as linked to the care of the soul. Literacy has always been central to Protestant religious practice as a means to read the Bible and a way to worship God according to one’s lights. The constructions of literacy in tracts like “Memoir of James M’Corkle” offer a particularly American version of Protestantism in yoking the need for self-abnegation and the responsibility to act publicly on one’s faith. It is this particular combination that is the focus of this chapter. The connection between evangelical constructions of literacy and “public activism” open up questions about historical constructions of the nineteenth-century public sphere.



There are three key elements to the evangelical literacy practices represented in the tracts I look at in this chapter. The first, the emphasis on slow, thorough, careful reading, contradicts claims some literacy historians have made about evangelically-prescribed modes of reading. Second, I describe how literacy instruction is figured as what Michel Foucault calls a “technology of the self,” a means through which students learn to subsume self-serving impulses to become obedient servants of God (“Technologies” 45). This practice of self-abnegation connects literacy students to the third central element of evangelical literacy: the moral imperative of spreading evangelical literacy practices.

The “Memoir of James M’Corkle,” cited in the epigraph, embodies many of the qualities recommended in the tracts I examine in this chapter, not the least of which is a diligent pursuit of literacy. James is commended in the text for his “mild and governable disposition,” but it is his reading that ensures his place in heaven. James goes beyond simply using reading to reinforce lessons taught at Sunday school; he uses the texts he reads to open discussions with his parents about God (48.5). James’s literacy activities, reading and discussing texts, thus become a means to tend to both his and his family’s spiritual health. When James – like many children in tract literature – dies after prolonged illness, we are assured, partially because of his literacy activities, that his faith in God is intact and that his parents have benefited from his example.

The story of James M’Corkle can serve as an example of the kinds of texts that circulated in the nineteenth century which included representations of evangelical literacy practices. Such representations involved a set of discourses about literacy that offered arguments about the uses and values of literacy education. Literacy in this sense operates ideologically when it functions “as a mechanism for the individual’s structuring of reality” and for socializing the young (Soltow and Stevens 61). Any particular form of literacy operates in a field of multiple, contested

ideologies of literacy that are always in states of flux rather than singular, stable, and hegemonic. In reading the representations of evangelical literacy as offering complex and changing claims about the values and use of reading and writing, I complicate the history of literacy that argues that a Protestant literacy ideology sought only to produce “good” Christians, Americans, citizens, and workers in the mid-nineteenth century.

Because of their attention to technological innovation and to systems of distribution, these Protestant organizations, like the American Tract Society, significantly shaped American literacy activities in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> People encountered their publications through Sunday school libraries; periodicals; and through the outreach of colporteurs, the traveling distributors of religious texts. To call the number of texts printed and distributed by these evangelical societies impressive is to exercise restraint: according to David Paul Nord, by 1831 the New York branch of the ATS was “delivering more than 5 million pages of tracts per year to the city’s 36,000 families” (*Faith* 85). By the early 1850s, the ATS had a circulation of 200,000 for a monthly newsletter and a circulation of 100,000 for a monthly children’s magazine and claimed to have “circulated 2.5 billion pages of tracts and books” (Nord, “Systemic” 243, 259).<sup>10</sup>

The American Sunday School Union produced literature to fill the shelves of Sunday school libraries (Nord, *Faith* 77) while the American Tract society published godly literature to counteract the “satanic press” that was presumed to be leading the nation astray (Gutjahr 246). The archive of tract publications is very large, containing publications of multiple American tract societies and texts produced by English tract societies. Certainly, not all tracts explicitly sought to represent literacy practices; however, the similar constructions of literacy displayed in the ten tracts I discuss in this chapter (as well as the novels and autobiographies I discuss in the next

chapter) suggests that there was a widely available evangelical discourse about literacy circulating during the mid-nineteenth century.

The tracts I examine, which were published by the American Tract Society between 1833 and 1850, are tailored for children; they are often relatively short and some, like *Our Katie*, have large type, and they are often under ¼ of an inch thick. However, tract societies published a range of texts, from pictorial primers to one inch-thick treatises, such as *The Touchstone of Sincerity, or Trial of True and False Religion* and *Scripture History; or Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old and New Testaments*, meant for adults and older children. Although tract societies emphasized efficient production values, the covers of tracts are often decorated to signal value. Several of the American Sunday School Union tracts I encountered have covers that, while cardboard, look like marble, with green “veins.” Similarly, many of the American Tract Society tracts have embedded scrollwork borders on the covers. This marbling and scrollwork can be understood as signaling that these texts are valuable, even if the decoration is found on cardboard and not leather. Tracts were often given to students as rewards and gifts by Sunday school teachers and this attention to decoration marks perhaps heightens the value of these gifts.

## **2.1 EVANGELICAL READING PRACTICES**

Reading was central to evangelical religious expression. The extensive apparatus for the publication and distribution of printed material established by tract and bible societies testify to the significant role reading was thought to play in conversion. The importance of literacy to evangelicalism is emphasized through advice about reading slowly and carefully. This advice is

repeated, for example, in John S.C. Abbott's *The Child at Home; or The Principles of Filial Duty* (American Tract Society 1833). The preface carries these reading instructions:

This book is intended for the children of those families in which The Mother at Home is gone. It is prepared with the hope that it may exert an influence upon the minds of the children, in exciting gratitude for their parents' love, and in forming characters which shall ensure future usefulness and happiness. The book is intended, not for entertainment, but for solid instruction. I have endeavored, however, to present instruction in an attractive form, but with what success, the result alone can tell. The object of the book will not be accomplished by a careless perusal. It should be read by the child, in the presence of the parent, that the parent may seize upon the incidents and remarks introduced, and thus deepen the impression. Though the book is particularly intended for children, or rather for young persons, it is hoped that it will aid parents in their efforts for moral and religious instruction. (3-4)

Abbott's desires to solidly instruct, to avoid crass entertaining, and to make his lessons attractive reveal the complicated desires and fears underwriting tract literature. Abbott's caution that "careless perusal" is an inadequate reading method for this text underscores the claims he makes about the solid instruction promised in the text -- reading is not idle recreation. Abbott goes further in recommending that the text be read by the child with the parent, so that the parent can function as an interlocutor with the child reader. The fact that Abbott also transforms the parent-teacher into a student reflects the value placed on adult education and study in evangelical and Sunday school movements and also resonates with the proliferation of images of mother and child reading together.<sup>11</sup>

In a personal letter, James Alexander, the author of several tracts for the American Sunday School Union, offers his core principle: “The one great rule for Bible-study appears to me to be this: Read the text – the text – the text. Read it over and over, over and over. Read continually and largely” (qtd. in Hall, *Forty* 256). The intensive reading practice described here – the rereading and the emphasis on the text -- is suggestively similar to the reading practice labeled “close reading” today. The advice to read “largely” and the emphasis on studious reading practices runs counter to histories that characterize evangelicals as only promoting “fundamental” literacy. Ronald Zboray, for instance, stresses that evangelical literacy campaigns focus only on instrumental literacy instruction and were opposed to teaching what we would call “critical” or interpretative literacy (91). He maintains that evangelical literacy missions “discouraged reading through [their] stress upon immediate rather than educationally prepared conversion, emotional rather than analytical sermons, and, generally, oral performance rather than literary exposition” (109). For Zboray, this almost-worse-than-illiteracy literacy was connected to the so-called “feminization” of Protestantism and education (92, 104), contributing, in turn, “to the nineteenth-century reading public’s taste for sentimental literature by the notorious scribbling women” (104).<sup>12</sup>

In her analyses of American Sunday School Union publications, Gillian Avery provides a picture much different than the one painted by Zboray. She finds that “[t]he ASSU . . . appended intensive ‘Rules for Reading’ on the back covers of publications: ‘Read slowly. Read thoughtfully. Read understandingly. Review what you read. Read but few books, and those the best. Read with a view to improvement rather than amusement’” (121). The deliberative reading practices emphasized in American Sunday School Union publications can be found in other evangelical texts as well. Indeed I have encountered nothing in the tracts that justifies

Zboray's claim that evangelicals "discouraged" reading. Rather, I found the strong commitment to reading that is instructive work and not idle entertainment. Reading was serious work, reflecting the belief "that reading alone could save lives and souls – or destroy them . . . .The power of religious reading lay not in a Pentecostal outpouring of the spirit but in *careful, studious, intensive reading*" (Nord, *Faith* 114) (italics mine).

In this literacy culture the reader is imagined to be engaging in an intense relationship with texts – interpreting, discussing, excerpting, and memorizing texts. Thus, reading is not only a moral duty for evangelicals, but it is also an intellectual endeavor: an evangelical life in this sense requires intellectual work. One expression of this evangelical literacy work was literary albums – essentially anthologies – constructed by readers "to collect original and selected writings that they wanted to remember and share with others" (Brown 124). Evangelical readers, especially the "young, mobile, and relatively educated," would ask friends, teachers, and classmates to "transcribe a favorite selection of prose or verse or compose one" in their albums (125). Candy Gunther Brown characterizes the material in these albums as "eclectic": they could include poems, excerpts from sermons, hymns, and selections from periodicals as well as original pieces (126).<sup>13</sup>

The intensity which suffused evangelical reading partially accounts for the ambivalence governing evangelicals' response to the American literary scene. Fiction had, at best, a tenuous foothold in evangelical print culture. Nonetheless, tracts are replete with stories that read like narrative fiction with extraordinary characters, dialogue, and a narrative arc. Thus, the evangelical constructions of literacy maintained a strained contradiction: even as "evangelicals objected to secular novels more vehemently than to any other genre," they also borrowed "fictional devices and even wrote novels" (Brown 95). This apparent contradiction was fueled

by the necessity of adapting to the tastes of a reading public increasingly formed by secular fiction. Because of what was perceived as the serious and escalating threat posed by the “secular press,” evangelical authors borrowed successful narrative techniques from secular print.

The goal of these concessions to what was perceived as popular taste was to woo readers to religious material; Paul Gutjahr argues, for example, that American Protestants sought to “commingle scriptural truth and fictional fancy in order to attract their countrymen to the Bible’s message” (5). Indeed, the American Sunday School Union’s 1839 teacher handbook, *The Teacher Taught*, counsels

The prejudice against fiction may overdo its work. Those who would exclude it entirely from all works, would exclude some of the finest and most instructive passages of the Holy Scriptures. All will agree that what purports to be fact in conversation or in books should be fact. But various uses may be made of facts. They may be stated as evidence or as illustrations of truth; and they may also be brought into a connected story or narrative in which fictitious names and places are given, and this without any violation of the principles of truth. (341)

The ASSU here characterizes “some of the finest and most instructive passages of the Holy Scriptures” as *fiction* and draws a distinction between truth and fact. Fiction is defended as a tool that potentially may reveal truth even though it may manipulate facts.

Faced with complex anxieties about literature, some evangelical writers and editors did not rely solely on religious truth to justify the use of fictional techniques. The texts produced under the auspices of the ATS were supposed to be true stories, truly told (Nord, *Faith* 121). Because of this, religious publishers favored memoirs or biographies – or narratives that borrowed from these genres.<sup>14</sup> Brown explains that “evangelicals privileged memoirs because

they considered example a powerful tool to mold Christian ‘character’” (88). In evangelical print culture literary texts function as exemplars, which can account for the focus on one or two exemplary characters in tract literature. Tract literature’s emphasis on exemplary characters belongs to a larger literary tradition that includes such texts as James Janeways’ 1671 *A Token for Children, Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Death of Several Young Children* (Avery 33). Some nineteenth-century “secular” fiction – American and British – also formed a part of this literary tradition; the emphasis on conversion and moral activism in these novels, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Dombey and Son*, further suggests the extent to which seemingly-secular fiction shared themes with evangelical literary culture.

And yet, the consolatory message that tracts borrowed from fiction to bring readers to the Bible was muted by the ever-increasing number of literary texts competing for readers. For instance, evangelicals could not be assured that as *The Teacher Taught* argued, “the story is only the vehicle: the attention of the reader is not fixed on the story” (342). James W. Alexander, the nineteenth-century Princeton theologian and professor of rhetoric and composition who wrote a number of tract stories, betrays ambivalence about participating in an extensive literary culture. In an 1834 letter he argues,

*the Bible is the book* to educate the age. Why not have it the chief thing in the family, in school, in the academy, in the university? The day is coming; and if you and I can introduce the minutest corner of this wedge, we shall be benefactors of the race. I can amuse a child about the Bible; I can teach logic, rhetoric, ethics, and salvation from the Bible. (qtd. in Hall, *Forty* 217)



Although Alexander suggests that the Bible should be the “chief” book in education, as a writer of tract stories he is, in some ways, in competition with the Bible for readers. Tract writers, like Alexander, had to balance on a tightrope: their books were supposed to lead the reader to the Bible without engrossing that reader too much in the tract itself. Evangelical critics of Sunday school books, for example, argued that “[a] good book inclined the reader to love ‘The Book’ more, while bad books made the Bible seem uninteresting, remote, or unpalatable” (Brown 107).

Even as a reader, Alexander describes himself struggling between his sense of duty to the Bible and his desires for expansive literary “excursions.” He belongs to a literary club with his colleagues at Princeton and teaches two “private classes in belles-lettres” (qtd. in Hall, *Forty* 235). He confesses that he “suffer[s] from anglomanie” (qtd. in Hall 268) and refers in his correspondence to a Norton-like list of authors, including Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, George Crabbe, Cobbett, Fuller, Gibbon, Sigourney, Bacon and Pope.<sup>15</sup> He is an evangelical *and* an intellectual suspicious of democracy and yearning for a “noblesse, or a literary caste” (qtd. in Hall 239). He yearns, like other nineteenth-century literary critics, for a national literature, writing: “I wish to see American literature take a start. I long for the time when our productions shall be truly *American*, not slavish copies of Transatlantic works, but impressed with the national character” (qtd. in Hall 36).

Yet, he remains conflicted about his reading habits. In an 1837 letter he underscores the potential fallout of a struggle between “our” books and “*His*” book:

No conviction of my soul gains more strength than that our great study should be *The Bible*. I reproach my butterfly mind, for her idle excursions. Yet one consolation I certainly find: though I am much away from my Bible, as I am much away from my wife and boys, yet when I *do* get back, I feel that I love them

mightily. O how! how! how shall we check the waste of mind upon the ever-increasing frivolities of literature! Literature needs a Deluge. We are antediluvians in this regard. Is God about to banish our impertinent rivalry of *his* book, by sweeping our books away by war, discord, or other calamity? I hope not. Let me bring reform at home. I am ashamed of piddling all my days among periodical scraps, and short-lived nothings, while whole tracts of Scripture remain unexplored. (qtd. in Hall 249-250)

Alexander attempts to rationalize his “idle” literary “excursions,” arguing that absence from the Bible makes his heart grow fonder for it. He compares this experience to the “mighty” love he feels for his wife and children when returning from his frequent absences; his scripture, then, is not so much neglected but taken for granted, and extensive reading allows him to appreciate it anew. Alexander then bemoans the “ever-increasing frivolities of literature,” distinguishing apparently between acceptable, non-frivolous literature – the tract literature – and frivolous literature that diverts readers from the Bible (qtd. in Hall 249). Alexander does not resolve any contradictions among his roles as a tract writer, theologian, and literary critic. Instead, evangelicals, like Alexander, sought strategic accommodations with “secular” literary culture in order to extend the evangelical literacy.

## **2.2 TRACT STORIES: NARRATIVES OF LITERATE LIVES AND EARLY DEATHS**

The literature published by the American Tract Society shares characteristics with the secularly-published literary narratives I discuss in chapter three, among which is an emphasis on

the diligent student who displays an enthusiasm for both reading and religion and on the child who must learn self-abnegation. One of the stories in John Abbott's *The Child at Home* can serve as an example of these dual impulses. In "The Police Court," a widow finds herself urging the court to put her daughter in jail; the widow's testimony against her daughter includes the claim that "she loved the fields better than her book . . . Having thus become a truant and a deceiver, she was prepared for any crimes" (11). The child's desire to run wild is related to her lack of enthusiasm for reading. Abbott's text, like other tract literature, however, is more heavy-handed than the novels I discuss in chapter three. Abbott pounds home the lesson to be ingested from "The Police Court":

But that child is a worse viper, who, by his ingratitude, will sting the bosoms of his parents . . . God will not forget the sins of such a child. His eyes will follow you to see your sin, and his arm will reach you to punish . . . Little are you aware of the woes you are preparing for yourself. I hope that no child who reads these pages will ever feel these woes. (13)

Tract literature often presupposes, as Abbott does here, that children are in grave danger of being damned if they die young. The stakes are high in these texts for children to understand their duties as Christians, pursuing evangelical literacy chief among them. The significance of adopting a Christian worldview is underscored by the effects the child's life has on the people around him or her. This lesson is consistently promoted in tract literature.

Even the table of contents in Abbott's collection is an opportunity for emphasizing the responsibilities children have toward their communities. The table of contents includes stories that are arranged in this order: "Effects of a child's conduct upon the happiness of its parents. The young sailor. The condemned pirate visited by his parents. Consequences of disobedience.

A mother's grave. The sick child" (5). The sequence of titles here suggests the causal relations between a child's misbehavior and a parent's death (and child's subsequent illness). Abbott repeats this form of sequencing, putting in a series these titles: "The dying child. Peace of a dying hour disturbed by falsehood previously uttered. Various ways of deceiving. Thoughts on death. Disclosures of the judgment day" (5). Title sequences like this which imply that a dying child has reason to fear judgment day because of a "falsehood previously uttered" are baldly didactic. In part, because of the shorter length of the stories in tract literature, these narratives seem to offer starker lessons than their novel-length cousins.

Evangelical literacy texts celebrate characters who are diligent in the process of achieving and maintaining self-abnegation. While diligence, which Avery calls the "prime virtue" of Protestantism, is often figured as the keystone in the arch joining American Protestantism to American capitalism, diligence has another significance (104). Material rewards are at best secondary to a process of self-(un)fashioning. Material prosperity in tract literature is meaningless unless accompanied by spiritual transformation and proselytizing; again and again, tract stories end with claims that the self-effacing title or main character (dead, living, rich, or poor) catalyzed spiritual transformations in the people around him or her.

Nowhere is this more true than in tracts with female protagonists. While the material realities affecting female characters in ATS literature (as well as the novels I write about in chapter three) are often underscored in the narratives, "success" is always defined by the spiritual transformations these characters inspire in others. Material success, like marriage and a stable home, are secondary concerns; indeed, the female protagonist is often rewarded for her diligent tending to her spirituality with an illness, death, or hardship which allows her to convert the people around her.

In “Catherine Warden; or, the Pious Scholar: A narrative from real life,” by William Dunn, the female character’s spiritual journey occurs against a backdrop of the labor expected of women and girls, but the reward at the end of this journey is not material.<sup>16</sup> This story, like so many others published by the American Tract Society, claims to be true and relies on the narrator’s voice to establish its authenticity. The story begins with the narrator and not Catherine Warden: “On my returning home from my first college session, [I] was solicited by a number of families, in the neighborhood of my father’s dwelling, to undertake the education of their children in a private school, which was then destitute of a teacher” (3). The narrator’s perspective emphasizes his distance from childhood, suggesting that the story addresses adult as well as child readers. He writes:

There is something very agreeable in teaching children. Their naïve simplicity – their cheerful obedience – their eagerness to please – their generous emulation, are truly gratifying . . . There is much in the power of parents, of teachers, and of masters, in aiding them by representations of the truth and heavenly nature of religions, as they grow up. (4)

The qualities the narrator praises – the obedience, naiveté, and eagerness – in children recommends those qualities to child readers but also ought to appeal to adult readers who need to shepherd children toward the truth of religion. The narrator explains that his pedagogy is catalyzed by his view that the children are “so many young immortals, for any thing I knew, on the very brink of the grave, and all of them standing in need of redemption” (5).

The Catherine of the title is the ten-year-old student most “affected” by these lessons (5). Most significantly, she is an avid reader:

Part of the exercise of her class, during the week, was to read the sacred Scriptures; and in preparing the lesson, she was most diligent and assiduous. She was deeply interested in what she read, and eager to understand it. In consequence of the interest she took in the subject, she soon came to read with a propriety, an ease, and a pathos, that is seldom attained by children, and never but by those who understand what they read. However much divine grace may be covered by the rubbish or dust of a present world, it is exceedingly lovely, when it appears, particularly in youth. (6)

This is not a simplistic portrayal of evangelical literacy. Catherine is praised for her desire to understand the sacred text, and her insightful way of reading this text, touched by pathos, is developed through her assiduous attention to her assigned lesson and her interest in reading. Further, there is an acknowledgement that texts, even the scripture, can be made to speak in different tones depending on the facility of the reader. Thus, both Catherine's diligent character and her advanced literacy (her level of reading comprehension) are understood as expressions of grace.

Catherine's devotion to spiritual study is the most remarkable – and remarked on – element in this narrative. Her struggle is to steal the time for this devotion away from the work around the home her mother expects of her. Catherine's father is a collier, so the family is economically stable. We are assured that “in that part of the country the colliers are much superior in civilization, in moral, and religious knowledge” and that “the mining of coal, and of iron ore, which also abounds in that part of the country, is a very healthful employment, and those who engage in it can earn good wages without overworking themselves” (9, 10). In fact, Catherine's family has a nice house with a garden where Catherine reads the Bible and prays.

Nonetheless, Catherine hides from her mother in order to sneak time for reading and praying because she is afraid her mother will demand her time be spent caring for the baby or in other chores (11-12).

The discovery of this secret affects a change in Catherine's mother, who is filled with "self-condemnation and self-abasement, on a comparison of herself with this child (12). She exclaims, "God forbid, my child, that I should have prevented you from attending to the salvation of your soul. I wish I had more time to attend to these things" (12). Catherine's mother makes room for Catherine's study and introduces a plan that will benefit both mother and child: "You shall henceforth read to me in your leisure hours, (said her mother,) and when you wish to pray, you shall have the use of the little closet, and none of the other children shall be allowed to disturb you" (12-13). Catherine soon is despondent, however, confessing that she does not feel like she is devout enough:

When I come from school, I run to my stocking-knitting, or to my sewing, or to my story-books, and then to my bed, without thinking of God, except in my prayers: *after a pause, says she, it will not do to neglect my work, neither; we must work while we are in this world;* but there is surely a middle way; I may attend to my work awhile, and then read good books, and think of God and my Saviour. (15) (italics mine)

Although Catherine suggests that there is a balance to be found (a middle way) between work, play, and religion, she certainly seems to be suggesting that the work she has been expected to do interferes with her religious devotions. The marking of the pause before Catherine introduces the possibility of getting out of work altogether suggests her desire. Indeed, this speech results in her mother comforting her and "promis[ing] to give her time from her work to read good books,

and to meditate upon them” (15). This exchange dramatizes the obstacles children, particularly girls, might face legitimizing the copious reading advocated by the tract literature. It also suggests that parents should release children for the purposes of study.

Within the frame of this story the child has the moral advantage; her mother recognizes that she does not live the religiously-centered life her child tries to live. Catherine becomes an instrument for improving the spiritual health of her family, particularly when she falls gravely ill and dies. Even in her sickbed,

She seemed rather to rejoice than to be grieved on account of her illness, as it released her from the avocations of the world, and gave her more time to attend to the eternal concerns of her soul. She had committed to memory many of the psalms, and hymns, and some portions of the sacred Scriptures, which had been pointed out to her at school. The repeating of these, the reading of select passages of Scripture, and some little pious books, were her delightful exercises during her illness. (18)

Catherine’s illness releases her from work around the house and she devotes her time to “her delightful exercises,” which center on literacy activities – reading scripture and “pious little books” – likely tract literature -- and reciting memorized text. Her enthusiasm for these activities prompts the teacher-narrator “to advise her parents not to allow her to read too long at a time, in such a weak state” (21), although he does prescribe the gospel as a palliative if she becomes depressed (21). Catherine dies – a not uncommon resolution for stories about pious children, especially girls – leaving her family and our narrator more religious.

The narrator urges the reader to find conversion in this story, writing: “Little children, into whose hands this narrative may be placed, come to Jesus as your Saviour, in the morning of



life” (39). The narrator not only offers a way to read this story as a lesson in coming to Jesus early in life, but also circles back to the central importance of literacy activities in religious seeking. The “little children” hailed in this sentence are readers, the materiality of holding the book itself is alluded to – all in a story that centers on a child who is an avid reader of both scripture and “pious little books.”

To modern readers Catherine’s death might seem to more likely dissuade children from following her example, but the use of children’s deaths in these narratives as well as lamentations about the sinful child suggest that one strategy in religious literature is to press home the urgency of seeking spiritual transformation. In “I am afraid I have a soul,” for instance, the narrator asks,

Is the reader prepared for death? If not, how awful a thing it will be to die. Your friends cannot plant on your grave the shrubs and flowers that decorated the spot where this pious child rests. All they can do is to place the weeping willow over your mouldering body, and to write on your tombstone the affecting words, as expressing your own dying language, ‘How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof; and have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me!’ Prov. 5:12, 13. Let not your character be such that this record shall be suitable to it. (41.7-8)

The source of anguish in the epitaph here is the failure to seize the knowledge offered by teachers. Intriguingly, the kinds of instruction the gravestone refers to is ambiguous – potentially including all kinds of education. Most commonly, however, death in tract stories is often framed as a triumph and also as a lesson for the reader; in this way, the sacrifice of the main character echoes the founding sacrifice in Christian belief. Such sacrifice is alluded to in the epigraph to

*Our Katie*, an ATS publication set in Brooklyn. The epigraph, which is an adaptation from Thomas Tickell's 1721 elegy for Addison, reads, "She taught us how to live, and – Oh, too high/The price of knowledge – taught us how to die" (3).

*Our Katie* is an intriguing text – the title character is a young Irish immigrant, one of ten children who eagerly "adapted herself to the manners and customs of the new people she was with, and it was her earnest desire that her family should do the same" (4). Katie is assimilation itself, a potential role model for other immigrants and a type of Irish girl Americans can accept. We are informed that "Katie was not beautiful, nor even pretty, but there was an earnest look in her large dark eyes, and an expression of frankness in her countenance" (4). Her unassuming appearance masks her remarkable spiritual potential. When she signs up for Sunday school, "little did the Secretary think, as he glanced upon the little Irish girl standing so timidly before him, that beneath the rough exterior was hidden such a novel spirit as was afterwards manifested" (5-6).

Katie reveals several particular qualities: she is fastidious – this is remarked on multiple times – and is "anxious [that the children she watches, presumably her siblings] should learn habits of order and cleanliness" (5). She loves Sunday school and works as a home missionary even though "[t]he locality in which she resided was inhabited mostly by the lower class of Irish Catholics, who were bitterly opposed to the cause for which she so unweariedly labored" (8-9). Finally, she excels as a student of literacy, advancing to become a literacy tutor herself. Although the Bible had been sealed to her, what the narrator calls "a seal book," before attending Sunday school, she devours this religious text once she can read it (12). The narrator asserts that:

Her knowledge of Scripture was, for one so young, truly marvelous . . . on being once questioned by a teacher in whose class she was temporarily placed, where she had learned so much about the Bible, she replied, ‘I learned it all in Sabbath-school.’ She could commit to memory with great facility; and being very fond of reading, no spare moment found Katie without a book or paper in her hands. (11)

Katie attributes her success to her teachers at Sunday school, but the narrator underscores how significant her abilities are, writing that “it was no uncommon thing for her to repeat several hundred verses from the Bible and hymn-book at one time” (10). Katie’s literacy activities focus on memorizing and reciting religious text. We should understand memorization as a kind of literacy activity: Candy Gunther Brown describes it as weaving text “into the texture of everyday experience,” and thus in this sense memorization is an intimate method of interacting with text through “the internalization of ‘holy words we have thus made our own’” (199).

Significantly, like the literary characters I discuss in chapter three, Katie passes on her literacy education by tutoring other Sunday school students. She seeks out unprepared students and helps them find and learn short passages: “In this way many who would otherwise have been totally deficient, were enabled to recite a dozen verses before leaving the room” (10). Her literacy activities are not confined, however, only to other students or to the poor families she encounters on her home missions. She works as a domestic servant for an “estimable” Christian family; Katie reads the Bible and sings hymns for the ill husband: “[h]er simple comments on what she read at once amused and interested him, while her glowing faith seemed to quicken and increase his own” (20). As the narrator muses, “Who shall say that the ministrations of this blessed child were not instrumental in lightening his pathway to the tomb” (20). Katie’s interpretations – her “simple comments” – on the texts she reads refreshes the faith of the more

sophisticated and esteemed Christian. Soon, however, Katie dies as well. But her death further illustrates her “blessed” character. She refuses the alcoholic stimulant her doctor would administer because it would break her temperance pledge; most importantly, she dies quoting and singing hymns. Texts, and consequently literacy, are shown to be central to a good death.

In “Mary Ann Massey,” the American Tract Society offers another narrative that connects literacy activities with grace. At Sunday school, Mary Ann’s “orderly behavior and attention to instruction gained her the esteem of all her teachers” (46.4). However, it is not until Mary Ann is ill for several months that there is “evidence of a work of grace upon her heart” (46.4). After this, “[s]he attended more to prayer and reading her Bible, and gained much comfort from these exercises (46.4). The grace bestowed on Mary Ann prompts her to increase her reading and studying.

However, when she reads “The Ten Commandments Explained,” she “was alarmed to find herself guilty of breaking them all” (46.5). Mary Ann’s shocking self-condemnation can only be read figuratively because the narrator continually insists on Mary Ann’s wholesomeness. Her anguish about her sinful nature is evidence not of an actual history of sinning but of her diligent sense of her spiritual unworthiness – a trait often recommended in tract stories. Contrast Mary Ann’s self-assessment with the narrator’s commendation of her avid literacy activities:

Being often laid aside by illness, she spent much time in reading the Scriptures, and in committing large portions of them to memory, together with many hymns, which afterwards were a great comfort to her. This dear child manifested, at all times, the most affectionate attachment to her teacher, and the greatest anxiety to attend school when at all able to be out . . . She not only sought to gain instruction herself, but sometimes, when returning home with any of her school-fellows, she

would speak to them, and try to persuade them to be good children, and attentive to what they were taught. (46.6-7)

The narrator admires Mary Ann's attachment to school and her teachers; her interest in education – and in acting as a moral tutor for her peers – indicates her spiritual worth. Mary Ann's concern with her soul increases the stakes for the reader who does not recognize herself in Mary Ann. If Mary Ann, who seems so good, is worried about the state of her soul, how much more worried should the reader be? Mary Ann's anxiety about her spiritual worth is evidence of an unusually spiritual temperament. The reader is thus assured that Mary Ann is prepared for her early death.

Death is the ultimate achievement of self-abnegation. Young readers are steered toward anticipating death through stories that emphasize the necessity of tending to the soul at a young age. Literacy activities are critical to this cultivation of religious worthiness. Literacy thus functions as a technology of the self, a means through which readers subsume personal desire and exhibit dutifulness to God. The stark reality of death that haunts many of these stories is joined to the message that “the happiness of your whole life depends upon your cultivating an affectionate and obliging disposition” (Abbott 149). Through their “obliging disposition,” young readers enact obedience to God by demonstrating obedience to other people – although as in “Catherine Warden,” obedience to God trumps other obligations and opens space for even a young girl to challenge her duties within the household economy. Nonetheless, evidence of God's approval is often represented by other people, so that earning the acceptance and love of parents, teachers, and other figures of authority is crucial.

Abbott even goes as far as insisting that a child's standing among his/her peers is a significant indication of worthiness. He admonishes, for instance, “If your companions do not love you, it is your own fault . . . If you are not loved, it is good evidence that you do not deserve

to be loved” (148). Abbott offers an “infallible recipe” for earning love, advising, “*Do all in your power to make others happy. Be willing to make sacrifices of your own convenience that you may promote the happiness of others*” (151) (italics original). Abbott’s “recipe” is a radical extension of the “golden rule,” a prescription for subsuming the self in service of others’ happiness. The evangelical literacy evinced here disciplines readers by characterizing the material and spiritual situation of young readers as necessarily unstable and by imposing on these readers obligations to engage in literacy activities that serve and, particularly, evangelize the community.

### **2.3 BAD BOOKS, REDEMPTION, AND LITERACY AS ACTIVISM**

Remarkably good children are not the only characters in tract literature, but in this literature one can also find dramatizations of spiritual failures and redemption. In the two tracts I write about in this section the narrative action revolves around the dangers posed by promiscuous reading, dramatizing that literacy activities must be disciplined if they are to serve evangelical ends. Perhaps more importantly, both tracts, *The Pilgrim Boy, with Lessons from his History: A Narrative of Facts* and *The Widow’s Son*, connect redemption to obligations to spread evangelical literacy in the public sphere.<sup>17</sup>

There are interesting consistencies between these stories; both title characters are introduced to evangelical literacy in their youths and both characters’ fall from grace is caused by reading “bad” books.

The pilgrim boy is first exposed to both religion and literacy by the childless, but propertied, couple who take him in when his father dies. The narrator describes how

the pilgrim boy was led, by the good woman whom he now called his mother, regularly to [church] . . . and sat by her side, with an old Bible, printed in 1718, in which he hunted out the proof-texts, and marked them by turning down a leaf. In those days, the minister quoted his proof-texts, chapter and verse, giving the people time to find and mark them. The Bible the boy carried was ten inches long, five inches broad, and three inches thick, covered with deerskin, and bound round with a strong strap, for its preservation. (23)

There are two elements worth noting in this passage. First, the importance of the age and materiality of the Bible the boy uses. Gutjahr has discussed the increasing anxiety produced by revisions of the Bible during the nineteenth century; the emphasis here on an older Bible suggests a conservative argument about the superiority and stability of a timeless Bible. Thus, the King James Version is treated as *the* Bible in American Protestantism until 1880. This timelessness is further emphasized by leather binding, which signaled the valuable and sacred quality of the Holy Book (Gutjahr 43). Second, this passage again suggests the importance of interacting thoughtfully with the text. The minister expects his congregation to attend to and mark the “proof texts” in the Bible, which is a kind of interpretative training. “Proof texts” are passages from the Bible that serve to clarify or settle theological questions.<sup>18</sup> Since proof texts are arrived at deductively, the hermeneutic here moves from conviction to proof. The reader goes to the scripture to find evidence which supports particular beliefs.

The pilgrim boy’s first school-teacher is “an old Scotch woman” who boards with his adopted parents.<sup>19</sup> Her teaching, which emphasizes literacy, centers on the New Testament and a spelling book, “which were then supposed to be necessary for boys who where [sic] to be farmers or mechanics” (6-7). She narrates “little stories out of the Bible” to the boy and draws

lessons from them about how to “avoid sin and keep out of bad company” (6). The boy responds positively to this education, especially because her pedagogy was marked by “[t]he earnestness of her manner, and the deep interest she manifested for him” which “let him to love her as if she had been his mother” (6). The effectiveness of her mothering pedagogy is contrasted against that of his next teacher, a cruel and neglectful “old Scotchman, who daily pulled the ears and thumped the heads of the boys to wake up their ideas; or applied a long rod, well laid on with both hands, to quicken their perceptions in grammar and vulgar fractions” (11). This teacher is replaced by an Irish sea-captain who is equally cruel, prompting the pilgrim boy to leave school “determined to study by himself, and as he had to work hard for his living, the only chance he had was to borrow books and read them at night by a hickory-bark light, as he sat on the hearthstone with his back against the wall” (13). In three years, even as he is working to make a living, the boy works his way through a circulating library of an impressive 300 volumes.

The pilgrim boy, already a prodigious reader, becomes susceptible to the temptation of bad books after a series of misfortunes makes him feel “as if God was dealing hard by him, as all unrenewed hearts feel when God afflicts them” (51). To appease God’s anger “he read and prayed more. While other boys were at their play, he was at his books” (51-52). While the pilgrim boy’s devotion to reading seems commendable, his motivation negates his attempts to connect with God: “But with all, he was an enemy of God; he served him through fear, and not from love” (51-52). It is in this mindset that the pilgrim boy encounters an old school chum who has married into a Universalist family “and was full of zeal for this new faith. He soon advanced his sentiments, the same that Satan preached in Eden” (73).<sup>20</sup> Although the pilgrim boy is skeptical about a religion that purportedly allows one to sin without punishment, he agrees to read Ballou’s “Treatise on the Atonement of Christ,” which offers a Unitarian belief that God



exists only in one person denying the doctrine of the Trinity. He reads it with “great delight” and “plans for the gratification of all the evil desires of his heart” (73-74).<sup>21</sup> This book sets the pilgrim boy on a path of spiritual darkness. While reading, in evangelical ideology, is one of the most significant tools through which a believer “acquaint[s] himself with duty and the way of salvation” (Jones 118), reading is also a potentially promiscuous ability through which believers can encounter texts that corrupt or threaten their faith.<sup>22</sup> Because of this, the reader needs to be cautious about the texts they agree to read; choosing texts sanctioned by a tract society would be one way of exercising this caution.

The narrative of the literacy-induced fall and regeneration of George in *The Widow’s Son* follows a path remarkably similar to that in *The Pilgrim Boy*.<sup>23</sup> Like the pilgrim boy, George benefits from the influence of pious parents. Like many widows’ children in nineteenth-century stories (and letter-writing guides), George is sent to work. His uncle establishes him in a merchant’s counting house in London; he resides with a religious, childless couple who talk about adopting him. After arriving in the city, George receives a letter from his mother which is extracted in the story:

‘As, my dear George, you are now removed from under the immediate inspection of your friends, and will be exposed to a variety of temptations, permit me to urge upon you the importance of reading the Scriptures, of regularly attending some place of worship on the Sabbath, and of avoiding the society of all who are gay and dissipated in their manners . . . I have had many trials. I have lost my property; I have buried your lovely sister; I have wept over the tomb of your pious father; but to see you turning your back on religion, would bring “my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.’ (2)

In his reply to his mother, George assures her that ““to promote your happiness will be, I trust, the constant effort of my life; and as I know something of the value of prayer, I hope you will always have me in remembrance when at a throne of grace”” (3). However, George is soon corrupted through the influence of unwholesome companions – a deist and a truly diabolical ex-Quaker – and their corrupting books. The ex-Quaker, who is particularly bitterly-opposed to religion, plots a “plan of seduction” for George (4). The first step in his plan is to keep George out late with witty stories; this makes George three hours late for prayers with his landlord. But the seduction really heats up when the ex-Quaker lends George a novel. George’s struggle to resist the novel is dramatized in detail:

He opened the volume, read the title-page, threw it on the table, and exclaimed, ‘No; I’ll not read it. I gave my word of honour to my dear mother that I would never read a novel, and I will not sacrifice my honour to please any friend.’ . . .As the book was elegantly bound, he took it up and examined the workmanship; he then read the whole of the title-page; then the preface; and as he found nothing very objectionable, he read on, till he heard a knock at the door . . .He took out his watch, and found that he had been reading two hours, and as it was the first novel he ever read, it had so deeply held his attention, that he had nearly finished it before he felt conscious of what he was doing . . .He read on, but the charm was broken by a recollection of his vow; and he again threw the book from him, exclaiming, ‘Fascinating wretch, thou hast beguiled me of mine honour!’ (5)

In this fascinating scene George is seduced first by the appearance of the “elegantly bound” novel and then by the seemingly innocuous front matter. The slide into sin begins with gradual steps, but not even George’s vow to his pious widowed mother can stave off the power of the

novel once it is picked up. In contrast to the thoughtful, careful reading recommended by evangelical literacy, the reading practice solicited by the novel is consuming. George loses track of time and is no longer conscious of his actions when reading the novel. This reaction to novel reading fulfills the dark predictions of anti-novel critics. Cathy Davidson explains that to these critics, “the power of fiction to preoccupy the reader was a double danger” (43). Not only could fiction interfere with work, but, according to the critics, “engrossed reading of the wrong text [was] a kind of seduction or even a state of possession” (43).

Fiction, then, was thought by some to strip readers of moral armor; by making readers forgetful of themselves, fiction could insert insidious lessons into the relaxed mind. It is this form of literacy practice that poses the threat to George’s honour. Indeed, George succumbs to the novel once again: “he saw the fatal book; but as he stood musing he said, ‘Well, I don’t know that I have received any moral injury from the book, and perhaps my mother did wrong to press me to give her such a pledge’” (6). Unfortunately for George, his distrust of his mother’s advice proves nearly fatal. Shortly after his novel reading, George breaks the Sabbath, goes to the theater, thinks of his old religious notions as “puritanical,” and becomes totally dissipated for two years during which he catches “many diseases” (8). Blame for this sad state of affairs can be directed at George’s first seduction by the elegant, unwholesome novel. Even the most innocent flirtation with the wrong kind of reading can lead to disaster.

The narrator of *The Pilgrim Boy* emphasizes the danger posed by even the most cursory reading of “bad books”: “the time you spend in reading a bad book is so much time spent in company with a bad character, and you cannot come in contact with filth without some of it sticking to you” (76). Books, like people, have character; the dangers posed by the wrong books are exacerbated because the true character of the book can be masked, and the unwary reader can

find himself naively misled. This happens to the pilgrim boy, who feels free to pursue his “evil desires” after reading the Unitarian “Treatise on the Atonement of Christ.”

Books are “bad,” according to the narrator of *The Pilgrim Boy* if they permit the reader to embrace immoral behavior or to adopt unorthodox views. The narrator explains:

A family library is an index to family character; the bookcase reflects the moral features. Better not read at all, than read bad books. Among all the classes of dangerous books, none are more fatal than those that oppose evangelical religion; and the nearer the counterfeit comes to the genuine, it is the harder to detect. (77)

The anxiety expressed in this passage suggests the doubled position in which the American Tract Society has placed itself. At once a sponsor of a literacy campaign commissioning, publishing, and disseminating books and a doomsayer warning the American reader about the swelling numbers of dangerous books, the ATS attempts to simultaneously encourage and discourage American literacy activities. Most worrisome for the narrator in this passage are such books as Ballou’s “Treatise on the Atonement of Christ” that pose a religious challenge to evangelical theology.

The narrator of *The Pilgrim Boy* emphasizes the danger of “bad books” by connecting the state of the nation to the state of young readers’ morals:

The reading of bad books has done more during the last twenty years, in our country, to poison the minds of young men, lower the standard of high moral rectitude, and shut the heart against the word and Spirit of God, than almost any other evil in the land. Show me the youth that pores over tales of fiction, and drinks their intoxicating poison, and I will show you a fictitious character, vacillating and unreliable. (77)

It has become a commonplace to say that comparing bad books to poison and intoxicants are familiar tropes in nineteenth-century criticisms of novel reading. The concerns about ingesting words suggest that reading is a physical activity, but what is important to note is that the consumer of books is, in fact, consumed. Interestingly, this conception of reading as physical consumption is not limited to one kind of book: it is because reading functions this way that readers need to limit their consumption to books of good character.

Of course, knowing which books have good character is not simple; this is why the reader is encouraged to limit his/her reading to books that are known quantities. The narrator of *The Pilgrim Boy* advises, “Let the Bible be your daily companion, and make yourself familiar with such books as have been written by the best of men on doctrinal and practical piety, together with biographies of the best men that have lived in this or other ages” (79-80). By reading books by and about people with good character, the reader ingests their qualities. The centrality of memorization in ATS scenes of literacy activity furthers the concept of ingesting the text. Once memorized, a text could be said to be incorporated into the reader.

The pilgrim boy’s soul is saved eventually through reading when he is an adult. Suffering from inflammatory rheumatism, the pilgrim boy struggles with the decision to give himself to God:

He strove for resolution to keep the vows his soul had made in anguish, till a friend he met one day handed him an old book, called, “The Afflicted Man’s Companion” . . . When he read the dying sayings of Christians recorded in that book, he resolved, by God’s help, to live and die the death of the righteous. (97)

It is significant that a book plays a central role in fixing the pilgrim boy’s resolution. He is inspired by the Christian examples he encounters in it and, perhaps, literally inspired by the

wholesome quality of the book. The pilgrim boy opens a Sunday school, obtains a library of Sunday school books, and becomes the neighborhood school teacher. The pilgrim boy shows that he has learned a valuable lesson about books when he buys this cache of Sunday school books.

Tract societies took the guess-work out of distinguishing between “bad” and good books; their imprimatur was a guarantee of orthodoxy. In this way tract societies which claim to be nondenominational like the ATS policed the borders between acceptable and heretical Christian theology. Societies like the ATS defined themselves as much by who they weren’t as by who they were; Brown explains that “self-identified evangelical denominations, despite biting antagonisms with one another, strove to form a united front against common opponents, including Roman Catholics, liberal Protestants, and other sects perceived as unevangelical” (40). The tract societies made it possible for evangelicals to pursue the literacy reform they yearned for on a national level.

Evangelical literacy activities are central to the pilgrim boy’s life as a teacher; at “recess he [was] uniformly employed in committing to memory the passages of Scripture which contained the Sunday-school lesson, together with all the proof-texts” (132). The pilgrim boy’s activity makes him gravely ill; people are moved and convert at his seeming-death bed. But because he accepts his death as God’s will, he lives and he goes on to increase his public efforts to share his faith. The narrator reports that “[a]s he believed he had been led to Christ by reading religious books, he bought from his own scanty means all he could, and lent them to his neighbors. The books opened the way for religious conversation . . .” and allowed him to reach hitherto closed minds (138). Books are thus powerful conduits of conversion because they provide occasions for proselytizing.

Books are not sufficient in themselves; rather they can only be tools for inducing the inquiry that leads to conversion, if they are the right book. The pilgrim boy's efforts on behalf of the community are significant, particularly as they revolve around his propagation of evangelical literacy through loaned books and Sunday school. In these activities, the pilgrim boy is meeting an obligation to publicly act on religious convictions, an obligation that is often underscored in tract literature and in the literature I read in chapter three. The narrator of *The Pilgrim Boy* clarifies this obligation:

Every Christian should be a laborer in his vineyard, and we live in a day when every one can do something. There are many neglected children untaught at home, whom you might gather into Sunday-schools, and be the means of saving. There are many impenitent sinners around you, to whom you might speak a word or lend a tract, and nothing would be more likely to benefit yourself. (135)

The importance of working to save other members of the community had been long-established. David Hall argues, for instance, that American Puritans understood themselves as called to “ethical activism” (Hall qtd. in Nord 17). For nineteenth-century evangelicals this “ethical activism” occurred both within the individual and in the society at large. And literacy taught how to be an activist and was, in some ways, a form of this activism.

Like the pilgrim boy, George from *The Widow's Son* finds spiritual rebirth – and moral activism – through affliction. And, also like the pilgrim boy, evangelical literacy accompanies George's return from a sinful life. George is on his death bed from the illnesses caused by his dissipation. He despairs for his soul. Knowing he cannot be saved because he refused God, he writes this letter to his mother:

‘Dear Mother – I am sorry to inform you that I am rather indisposed, and that I am obliged to leave London for a change of air. You may, therefore, expect to see me in the course of a few days. O pray for me, for the hand of God has touched me. I shall come by the mail which will pass through your village about eleven in the morning’ (11)

The formality of this letter betrays George’s alienation from the mother he had disappointed. However, his pious mother’s love and George’s recovered fear of God prepares him for physical and spiritual regeneration. After his mother prays for him, George’s recovery accelerates and he finds himself able to read a hymn book for the first time in years. His religious rebirth is finally sealed when he attends a service with his mother. The mode through which the preacher reads and interprets 1 Cor 6.17 is singular in George’s experience and allows him to pray for the first time in years.<sup>24</sup> In the preacher’s interpretation of the text

There were no flights of a lofty imagination in the composition of the discourse; no powerful appeals to the conscience; no master strokes of arguments leveled against either the root or branches of infidelity; no terrific enunciations of the Divine displeasure; but a calm, methodical, and spiritual amplification of the doctrine of our union with Jesus Christ. (16)

The preacher’s interpretative “amplification” of the text is marked by sobriety. This is a reminder that evangelical literacy practices, at least as constructed by the ATS, are not coincident with religious enthusiasm.<sup>25</sup> As Nord insists,

[f]or the Congregational and Presbyterian leaders of the American Tract Society, still imbued with a Calvinist faith in rationality and learning and a fear of



‘enthusiasm,’ the destruction of reason was surely the most dreadful effect of fiction upon the mind of the reader. (117)

The emphasis on close, studious reading and interpretation in the examples I have discussed here suggest that at least one version of evangelical literacy promoted what we might call close, critical reading.

Like the pilgrim boy, George ministers to the community after his conversion. He publicly testifies to his change and confronts his ex-Quaker friend. Although George promises to simply “recommend” his religion through his example (20), he eloquently contrasts their positions:

‘What you deem the yoke of ignominy, I esteem the badge of honour; what you deem a cunningly devised fable, I esteem truth. You won me over to your sentiments, and what have they done for me? They impaired my health; they tore up the foundation of a good constitution; they plunged me into despair; I lived a skeptic, but I found that I could not die one.’ (19)

What is remarkable about George’s testimony is his comfort with naming the criticisms of his reclaimed belief – this comfort strengthens his rhetorical position, suggesting he has entertained the worst criticisms and found them lacking. George vows not to “obtrude my religious sentiments on the attention of others” (19), but becomes a Sunday school teacher, sick visitor, and an agent of the Tract Society. It is not entirely clear why George perceives these missionary activities as nonobtrusive; perhaps because George is presumably addressing real needs in the community through his work, he sees himself less as a proselyter than an exemplar. Like the pilgrim boy, George finds fulfillment in these activities; we are assured he “never appeared more

delighted than when he had the prospect of promoting the spiritual welfare of those whom he once attempted to corrupt and destroy” (20).

Although George’s activities benefit the particular communities in London he ministers to, literacy activism is overlaid with American nationalist import in *The Pilgrim Boy*. *The Pilgrim Boy* begins by connecting the years of the pilgrim boy’s childhood – and, thus, the early years of the American republic – to the dangers faced in taming the wilderness. The reader is told that the boy was born in the

early part of the nineteenth century in what was then called the backwoods, where the howl of the wild and the scream of the panther were as common as the snorting of the iron horse is now about New York and Boston. In many places the marks of the Indian’s tomahawk were still to be seen on the sugar-maples, and the graves of many who had fallen victims to these cruel instruments of death were still fresh. (5).

The narrator celebrates the form of religious worship that he claims accompanied this heroic American encounter with the backwoods. The narrator emphasizes the importance of understanding religious texts: “In those old-fashioned times, the first thing the minister did was to read and explain the portion of the Psalm to be sung, so that people might sing with the understanding, which often took nearly an hour” (24). Here value is placed on understanding religious text and on pedagogical interventions that promote this understanding.

Further, *The Pilgrim Boy’s* readers are encouraged to imagine that worthy characters may hail from impoverished circumstances and through their actions can improve their lot since in America wealth and privilege are not hereditary. This possibility is specifically attached to a nationalist message in *The Pilgrim Boy*:

As a general rule, the rich of one generation are the poor of the next. John Jacob Astor and Stephen Girard were poor boys. Perhaps the children of some who slighted them, have since been their servants, or fed by their charity. Many of the richest men of our cities were once poor boys, but honest industry has made them rich. Another class of poor boys have filled the highest stations in our land. Franklin was a poor boy, and he became the next man to Washington in his day. Henry Clay was a poor boy; many a day he rode to mill on a pony with a sack of corn to get it ground, yet he became one of the greatest statesmen in our land. Go to all our colleges and seminaries, hunt up all the eminent ministers of the gospel, and you will find, on inquiry, that more than one half of them were once poor boys. Let the success that has attended other poor boys stimulate you to noble efforts; set your standard high, aim at great things, resolve to be a great good man, bend all your energies to that end, and God will take care of the rest. (9)

This passage takes part in familiar discourse about American opportunity. There is also an undercurrent in this passage that suggests that there are poor boys who are particularly worthy of prestige and who God may take interest in over privileged children. Yoking a material promise to spiritual worth becomes a commonplace in Sunday school literature by the 1850s: “the stress in the Sunday school book was less on conversion and spiritual qualities and more on the matters of this world: godliness and prosperity march hand in hand; diligence, a prime virtue, inevitability leads to material success” (Avery 104). I would argue that this excerpt from *The Pilgrim Boy* presents material reward less as *inevitable* than as potential – the pilgrim boy is a success in the end because he evangelizes his community; he is not wealthy or politically powerful.

## 2.4 CONCLUSION: EVANGELICAL LITERACY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In evangelical culture, the right kind of literacy fertilizes Christian character; literacy is both a means for circulating Christian models and – though literacy instruction -- a tool with which one may reform neighbors, neighborhoods, and the nation. The constructions of character, virtue, and duty advanced by evangelical cultures of literacy, then, are figured as interventions in a national public sphere. Furthermore, the evangelical obligation to labor in God’s “vineyard” blurs easy distinctions between private and public spheres.

The proliferation of benevolent societies, many of which were founded in the 1830’s, speaks to the intense interest of religiously-motivated groups to act within a public sphere (Schmidt 11). Some critics consign churches and schools to a private sphere; Zboray, for instance, characterizes “the family, the church, and the academy” as “private scenes of literacy instruction” (95). But, if we see schools and churches as sites where individuals participate in public discourse, we allow ourselves to see that even individuals without economic or political power have always played a part in shaping American culture as it is constituted through public discourse. Furthermore, recognizing that churches, evangelical societies, and schools participate in publics built on the circulation of books, journals, correspondence, and textbooks may allow us to describe how multiple publics (or counterpublics) construct public discourse in relation to each other. Certainly, the ATS, the American Sunday School Union, and the American Bible Society should be read as organizations that break down simple distinctions between the public and private spheres.

Evangelical constructions of literacy shapes a world view in which political, economic, or labor activities are informed by religious beliefs; this literacy further sought to create citizens and thereby to transform the national public. By acknowledging the complex connections between

literacy, religion, and citizenship, we can begin to see publics shaped by moral imperatives tied to “a growing tendency of individuals to assert autonomy and citizenship by virtue of their reading and publishing” (Warner x-xi).

The religious and moral activity undertaken by the individual American evangelical Christian is intended to affect the larger community. Brown explains that evangelicals “mediated and structured seemingly private experiences to connect with a larger social experience” (10). As will be demonstrated more fully in Chapter 3 religious fiction – and the scenes of literacy instruction in these texts – was a means to make these connections; religious fiction “was advocated as a powerful new weapon in the battle to transform the United States in its every aspect into a more God-centered, moral nation” (Gutjahr 159). If “the narratives in ATS tracts . . . read remarkably like the sentimental, romantic novels and story papers that the editors deplored” (Nord 121), we might, then, see the tract society literature I discuss in this chapter and the “sentimental” fiction I discuss in the next chapter as expressions of the same project.

Books read today as “sentimental” fiction, particularly *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Wide, Wide World* along with books like *Ben Hur*, were understood in the mid-nineteenth century to be sacralizing fiction. One can see in David Nord’s definition of sentimentalism an attempt to reclaim the term from its critical baggage: “sentimentalism was a set of cultural practices designed to activate the moral sense and ultimately encourage moral action” (46). Thus, some of the most popular mid-century fiction could be read, by those with eyes to see and ears to hear, as religious revelations.<sup>26</sup> According to Gutjahr, *The Wide, Wide World*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and *The Lamplighter*, which “all sold well over 100,000 copies in the decade before the Civil War,” were written by “authors [who] saw their books as religious parables or true stories that could

expose readers to the truths and values of the Bible by placing scriptural themes and archetypes in more contemporary settings” and, thus, these texts were very much like the tract literature (159). As proof of this contention, Jane Tompkins points out the frequent religious allusions in these novels, the writers’ religious affiliations, and Susan Warner’s work as a tract visitor (*Sensational* 149, “Afterword” 592). In this sense, distinctions between secular and religious fiction were not clearly marked in antebellum America in part because they were published by the same commercial publishing houses (Blodgett 14). In the next chapter I explore how a selection of popular, “secular” mid-nineteenth literature reveals congress with evangelical literacy.

### 3.0 LITERACY EDUCATION AS CONVERSION PEDAGOGY IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY LITERATURE

In her afterword to the 1987 printing of Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World*, Jane Tompkins submits that the Christian world view in Warner's novel is alienating to a twentieth-century reader. Twenty years after Tompkins' wrote this afterword, with the United States in what might be a third great awakening, the Christian world view in this 1850 novel may not seem so alien or anachronistic.<sup>27</sup> Tompkins claims that nineteenth-century popular fiction by women "has been dismissed by modern critics primarily because it follows from assumptions about the shape and meaning of existence that we no longer hold," in particular, assumptions about God's providence, about the power of prayer (596). Since Tompkins' afterword, critics have begun to realize that the "assumptions" shared by Warner and her contemporaries have present-day analogues. In this chapter, I return to the texts that Tompkins and other feminist and post-colonial critics taught us to take seriously because these texts, by virtue of the very qualities that first relegated them to obscurity – their perceived conservatism, domesticity and sentimentality -- grapple with the complications of fusing national and religious subjectivities. I read these texts, particularly Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850); Maria Cummin's *The Lamplighter* (1854); Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig; Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859); and Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), as revising and

improvising the possibilities for American, Christian subjectivities. In these works, improvisation occurs through scenes of literacy instruction.

Of particular interest for my purposes, Tompkins places Warner's novel – and the “popular fiction” of her contemporary female novelists –in a historical cultural context that includes “hortatory and instructional” media such as “tract society reports, primers, etiquette books, journal entries, magazine stories, and pulpit homilies” (596, 595). Through this network of texts, writers and publishers represent an evangelical Protestant subjectivity in American culture. The texts I look at – which range from white women's “domestic novels” to novels and autobiographies by African-American men and women – present literacy acquisition and literacy activity as intertwined with the formation of an identity that is both Christian and American. Provocatively, although the literate, Christian, American identity modeled in these texts promotes the “consent” of literally dis-enfranchised groups to what Nancy Armstrong calls “moral hegemony,” these authors also appropriate moral discourse, opening up spaces in which these disenfranchised groups, represented by the fictional or autobiographical characters, critique and even change political, social, and economic arrangements.

One of my goals in looking at texts by white women alongside texts by African American men and women in this chapter is to break the stranglehold of typologies that organize texts into neat categories such as “domestic/sentimental” fiction or “slave narratives.” These categories encourage readings which presume, on the one hand, a domestic preoccupation with private lives and, on the other, a historically-specific personal testimony. Looking at selections of texts from both genres and across racial categories produces alternative ways to read them. In particular, we can begin to see how literacy instruction across the generic boundaries – intertwined with Christianity – authorizes politically-powerless characters to critique, resist and amend laws,



doctrines, and ideologies. These literacy narratives are not merely “domestic” – if by that one means separate from the public sphere because they do, in fact, engage with topics of public debate (and quite literally enter the public). The spiritual-literacy journeys undertaken by the characters in these texts position these characters as engaged with public matters of concern, such as the responses of religious institutions to slavery and the relationship between economic dependence and liberty. In proposing a reading of these texts which doesn’t presume that religiously-inflected literacy education is necessarily “conservative” – defending and promoting, for instance, an ideology of separate spheres -- I look at how this education is represented, exploring what obstacles and goals the student faces and how the student experiences the demands put on her by her faith. This chapter describes how literacy pedagogy is represented as transformative, producing restrained Christian literary characters though disempowered students are endowed with the moral authority to challenge institutions they see as corrupt. Reading scenes of literacy instruction as at once transformative, restraining, and empowering complicates established notions about a nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres, generic classifications, and modern claims about transformative pedagogies.

The texts I discuss in this chapter include extensive representations of literacy instruction and literacy activities. Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* serves as a keystone text: not only was this book “one of the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century,” it was also, in Tompkins’ words, “the Ur-text” of that century in that its “ideology of duty, humility, and submission to circumstance, and its insistence on the imperative of self-sacrifice” embody “the values of the Victorian era” (Tompkins 584, 585). This novel about a girls’ spiritual and intellectual education is a touchstone for any examination of the mid-nineteenth century evangelical literacy since the scenes of literacy instruction so clearly participate in an evangelical culture, reflecting, perhaps,

Warner's own work in the New York City Tract Society. The three other central texts in this chapter – *The Lamplighter*, *Our Nig*, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* – can be read as revisions of Warner's story about a passionate girl's evangelical and intellectual education.<sup>28</sup>

The nineteenth-century witnessed a proliferation of literature concerned with literacy instruction. Scenes of literacy instruction appear in many of the century's most popularly celebrated books, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Wide, Wide World*, and *Little Women* as well as some of the most significant narrative political interventions – *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, for instance. This trope is long-standing and appears in texts on both sides of the Atlantic. Writers such as Olaudah Equiano, Jane Austen, and Samuel Richardson all depict scenes in which characters grapple with reading and writing, as do American writers who sometimes modeled their work on British precursors. Both Britain and the United States were engaged in public debates during the nineteenth century about popular schooling and the uses of literacy. We know, for instance, that “religious leaders in America and Great Britain often spoke of the need for literacy within the context of spiritual salvation” and “[t]heir concerns were both social and individual; both the salvatory effects of Bible reading on individual souls and the preservation of social order were their objectives” (Soltow and Stevens 11). This is a history we are familiar with since many literacy historians have written about the relationship between religion, literacy, and social control. Significantly, it is often the linkage between religion, specifically what Sarah Robbins calls “a Protestant ethos,” and literacy that underwrites the assumption that literacy education most often aimed at “social control” in the nineteenth century. For instance, Robbins writes that

Binding literacy acquisition so tightly to religious training promoted the genre's view of successful learners as necessarily Christianized, as in the case of *Uncle*

*Tom's Cabin*, at the potential expense of more secular versions of citizenship. Purportedly benign, literary educational programs that operated through a persistently Christian maternal focus could actually be used to justify control over potentially disruptive agents of resistance against white American middle class values (72-73).

Robbins assumes here, like so many critics, that Christianity and “the maternal” are inherently conservative forces which undermine “potentially disruptive agents of resistance” and change. They may well often function conservatively, but it is worth remembering that the roots of Christian literacy education – the Reformation –are “radical” to the extent that reformers sought to challenge traditional hierarchical monopolies on knowledge through concepts such as the priesthood of believers and *sola scriptura* which potentially broaden religious knowledge and authority.

Of course, Robbins is right that it is possible that a so-called “Christian maternal focus” *could* squash resistance; the question instead, though, should be to what extent did it? We know, for instance, that for some nineteenth-century African Americans, the connection between literacy and religion facilitated resistance to oppression. Janet Duitsman Cornelius explains that “literacy was . . . linked with freedom during slavery because it facilitated the African-American’s creation of a liberatory religious consciousness” (3). Obviously, then, there is a second potential for literacy education – even literacy education linked to religious ideology -- that counters efforts at social control. The disruptive potential of literacy education is attested to by British conservatives’ attacks on the socially-conservative Sunday School movement in Great Britain, which was adopted in the United States as well – attacks fueled by the belief that “the act of becoming literate was presumed to be an act of consciousness raising for the individual”

(Soltow and Stevens 7). Because reading is a promiscuous skill, literacy campaigns potentially could produce scores of readers propelled into political activism after reading, for instance, Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (7). It is significant that both Cornelius and Soltow and Stevens talk about religiously-motivated literacy instruction in terms of "consciousness raising" – a concept related to Paulo Freire's twentieth-century work on liberatory pedagogy.<sup>29</sup> I do not believe that the evangelical literacy education revealed in the scenes of instruction I examine here can be characterized as "consciousness-raising" as Freire would define it. While Freire's liberatory pedagogy focuses on empowering students to transform the political, social, and economic institutions which construct their lives by unmasking their modes for sorting, shaping, and disciplining people, the students in these nineteenth-century texts are most successful, in the terms established within the texts, when they defend and promote the evangelical culture by which they have been shaped. In many ways, the disenfranchised characters in these nineteenth-century texts are most able to exercise power by co-opting an evangelical message about duty and submission and using these values as a cudgel against institutions and figures of authority.

One of the tasks of this chapter is to sketch out to what extent representations of evangelical literacy instruction participate in constructing literacy education as both a means for producing restrained, submissive Christians and a means through which these same Christians legitimate confrontations with authority. The nineteenth-century texts I look at in this chapter must be read within the long tradition of Protestant dissent and resistance. Literacy education parallels a spiritual journey in which the student faces many obstacles until she can emerge at the end as simultaneously an exemplar and reviser of Christian and American values. As such, many of these literary narratives cite Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, with the literacy student cast as Christian. Significantly, the literacy student's success is not measured necessarily by

acquiescence or accommodation to her world as it exists; she becomes instead responsible for acting on and changing circumstances she meets. Most of the central characters in these literacy narratives face the difficult task of defying corrupt institutions, and, importantly, their defiance is made possible and constrained by their religiously-motivated literacy education.

### **3.1 A PEDAGOGY OF TRANSFORMATION: EVANGELICAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION**

In many representations of literacy instruction, religious texts are the subjects of and motivation for study. Religion is central to literacy's transformative power in these texts. Frederick Douglass, for instance, writes in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) that he and his "loved fellow-slaves" worked diligently at the Sunday school he established so that they could "try . . . to learn how to read the will of God," an activity Douglass associates with "behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings" (401). For Douglass literacy is literally humanizing – through literacy education (linked to investigating the will of God), the student is transformed into an "intellectual, moral and accountable being." Such a transformation carries grave responsibilities as the literacy student becomes, through this education, "accountable" to God. The literacy narratives I discuss in this chapter all link evangelical literacy education with such transformations.

*The Wide, Wide World's* Ellen Montgomery becomes an "intellectual, moral and accountable being" through her interactions with teachers who both teach her English and convert her to Christianity. Ellen is a young orphan struggling to live peacefully with her cruel Yankee aunt. She finds solace with Alice and Alice's brother John, immigrants from England,

who adopt Ellen as a student, educating and Christianizing her. John, who is studying to become a minister like his father, together with Alice, constantly correct Ellen for the passion, temper, and despair she often feels after confrontations with her aunt. Near the end of the novel, Ellen is removed from this aunt by wealthy Scottish relatives who challenge Ellen's sense of right and wrong. Ellen's educational program, in which religion and "secular" subjects are interwoven, is focused primarily on transforming her into a self-forgetting, serious Christian.

Although Ellen is presented as a flawed girl who must learn how to curb her willfulness, her voracious appetite for learning is one of her most central, consistent, positive qualities. Ellen's passionate desire for learning is contrasted with her Aunt Fortune's pragmatic, functional approach. To Aunt Fortune, an industrious, self-sufficient New England spinster, the only learning Ellen needs is knowing how to "read, write, and cipher" (139). Ellen, however, knows that this triad is "only the beginning"; she longs to study "French, and Italian, and Latin, and music, and arithmetic and chemistry, and all about animals and plants and insects . . . and a great many [other] things" (140).

Ellen is like other central character in that she shares the basic quality of the student in literary representations of literacy instruction: a desire for education, and this eagerness is met either by the admiration of other characters or by animosity shown by less savory characters. Gerty is met with approval and praise after one day at school transforms the once-resistant urchin into a diligent student in *The Lamplighter*. Following her first day at school, Gerty reads for her friend:

Her performance could not properly be called reading. She had not got beyond the alphabet and a few syllables which she had learned to spell; but Willie bestowed upon her a much well-merited praise, for she had really been very

diligent . . . Gerty had never looked so animated and happy as she did this evening. Willie promised to assist her in her studies; and the two children's literary plans soon became as high-flown as if one had been a poet-laureate and the other a philosopher. (59)

Gerty's literacy activity – her “literary plans” – offers at least the promise of public opportunity – the potential to become either a poet-laureate or a philosopher. Her education is taken up and directed by her blind benefactor, Emily, who converts her to Christianity. The educational program Emily establishes for Gerty emphasizes reading; this emphasis fosters in the child an “ambition to learn more, and understand better” which, according to Cummins, is “the greatest good she derived” from her education (71). Reading is central to Emily's pedagogy in *The Lamplighter*, as it is for Ellen's tutors in *The Wide, Wide World*.

In fact, even though Ellen is more educated than Gerty at the beginning of their stories, Ellen's primary teacher, Alice, insists that their work together must start with and center around reading and writing, which are Gerty's central focus as well. When *The Wide, Wide World's* Alice offers to help Ellen with her education, she underlines the importance of pursuing a study of English. Although Ellen expresses a desire to learn Latin and French, Alice humiliates Ellen in order to demonstrate that Ellen should properly concentrate on studying English:

‘Permit me to ask if you know English?’

‘Oh, yes, ma'am, I hope so; I knew that a great while ago.’

‘Did you? I am very happy to make your acquaintance then, for the number of young ladies who *do* know English is in my opinion remarkably small.

Are you sure of the fact, Ellen?’

‘Why yes, Miss Alice.’

‘Will you undertake to write me a note of two pages that shall not have one fault of grammar, not one word spelt wrong, nor any thing in it that is not good English? You may take for a subject the history of this afternoon.’

‘Yes, ma’am, if you wish it. I hope I can write a note that long without making mistakes.’

Alice smiled.

‘I will not stop to inquire,’ she said, ‘whether *that long* is Latin or French; but Ellen, my dear, it is not English.’ (171)

Alice’s understanding of an education in English here is a bit different than Ellen’s. By underscoring the incorrect idiom Ellen uses, Alice suggests that English composition is an advanced area of education – Ellen is already literate, but she needs continual practice. Significantly, Alice and her brother John, who will contribute to Ellen’s literary education, are immigrants from England. Within the scope of this novel, the British immigrant is a privileged person. He brings with him the cultural authority of England, but his decision to move to the States demonstrates his recognition of the immanent superiority of America. Ellen – a vigorous patriot and enthusiastic reader of Washington biographies – rejects the decadence of her Scottish relatives and the Calvinist harness of her Yankee aunt and marries John, becoming his helpmate in his ministry to her fellow New Englanders. She thus brings together cultural and moral authority.

Long before her marriage, Ellen pursues her education through a heterogeneous collection of sacred and secular texts. She works with the Bible, hymns, *Pilgrim’s Progress* as well as books of history, a grammar, a dictionary, and an expositor. There are also allusions to other secular texts. For example, Ellen and her playmates play “the Old Curiosity Shop,”



suggesting familiarity with Dickens. She is also sent English periodicals by John when he is away, and, ironically, Warner is careful to note that the periodicals have no fiction; instead, “they were as full of instruction as of interest” (464). Later, John forbids Ellen from reading a collection of *Blackwood’s Magazine* she had found because the magazines contain fiction, an encounter which tests Ellen’s obedience and asserts John’s authority over her reading material (475). This incident illustrates both Ellen’s difficulty in foregoing reading that she finds pleasurable and her ability to submit to John’s will. Most important to her education, however, are the religious texts Alice and John use to teach her how to read analytically.

Ellen and Alice use religious texts as material from which to work on reading comprehension and interpretation. In a practice that Ellen calls “talk[ing] over a hymn,” Alice reads a line of a hymn and Ellen explicates its meaning, with Alice’s help (238).

‘A charge to keep I have --/A god to glorify;/

A never-dying soul to save,/And fit it for the sky.’

Alice read the first line and paused.

‘There now,’ said Ellen, -- ‘what is a charge?’

‘Don’t you know that?’

‘I think I do, but I wish you would tell me.’

‘Try to tell me first.’

‘Isn’t it something that is given one to do? – I don’t know exactly.’

‘It is something given one in trust, to be done or taken care of. I remember very well once when I was about your age my mother had occasion to go out for half an hour, and she left me in charge of my little baby sister . . .’

‘I understand what a charge is,’ said Ellen after a little; ‘but what is this charge the hymn speaks of? What charge have I to keep?’

‘The hymn goes on to tell you. The next line gives you part of it. “A God to glorify.”’

‘To glorify?’ said Ellen doubtfully.

‘Yes – that is to honour, -- to give him all the honour that belongs to him.’

‘But can I honour Him?’

‘Most certainly; either honour or dishonour; you cannot help doing one . . .’ (238-239)

This scene of instruction might be familiar to many teachers of English. Alice breaks the hymn down line by line and makes Ellen responsible for producing an interpretation. Alice helps Ellen grasp concepts by moving from the abstract to concrete examples. Ellen is in the position of the novice reader, unsure of her reading and of her worthiness to occupy the active position of someone who honors God. The process of analyzing this hymn also serves specific cultural purposes. Literacy education is never just about skill but also involves the matter, the content. Literacy education, in this instance, is part of a broader educational program intended to produce religious conversion.

At another point in the novel, John introduces Ellen to *Pilgrim’s Progress*; through his reading of it to her and her private reading of his annotated version, she is transformed and testifies to her acceptance of Christianity. John’s annotations are described as “simple, short, plain, exactly what was needed to open the whole book to her and make it of the greatest use and pleasure” (370). John’s “notes,” which “open” the book for the young reader serve as an interpretative key which unlocks both the usefulness and pleasure of the text. The attention to

striking a balance between use and pleasure resonates with similar claims about and on behalf of the tract literature discussed earlier – an understanding that readers are on some level seduced in order to be taught. Indeed, Ellen’s attempt to convince the “wild child” Nancy to take up Bible reading also shares a common theme with tract literature. Ellen explains that, “I like to read [the Bible] because I want to go to heaven, and it tells me how” (361). When Nancy questions the necessity of girls their age worrying about dying and heaven, Ellen, like so many tract writers emphasizes the ever-present threat of dying young. She exclaims, ““Oh, Nancy! – little John Dolan, and Eleanor Parsons, and Mary Huff, -- all younger than you and I; how can you say so?”” (361). Ellen’s sense of the serious task of pursuing salvation is the fruit of her education. In the process of being taught how to read complicated, allegorical texts, Ellen adopts the religious convictions of her teachers. She claims, ““I think I am changed . . . I didn’t use to like to read the Bible, and now I do very much; -- I never liked praying in old times, and now, oh, what should I do without it! – I didn’t love Jesus at all, but I am sure I do now”” (352). Her dedication to living a Christian life is tested by her interactions with her aunt, during which Alice and John expect Ellen to practice self-abnegation, to transform resentment or hurt into meekness and humbleness, to become Christ-like.

Ellen’s submissiveness is a submission to divine Will and thus in Tompkins’ terms “belonged to the ideology of the evangelical reform movement that had molded the consciousness of the nation in the years before the Civil War” (593). Tompkins argues that the novels labeled “sentimental” share ideological ties with the evangelical reform movement and the literature coming out of the tract societies (of which Susan Warner was a member).<sup>30</sup> The common assumptions Tompkins outlines include: “a belief that all true action is not material but spiritual, that one obtains spiritual power through prayer, and that those who know how, in the

privacy of their closets, to struggle for possession of their souls will one day possess the world through the power given to them by God” (594). This evangelical education, then, is also a sentimental education as Cindy Weinstein would define it. Guided by Stowe’s definition of sympathy as “feeling right,” Weinstein characterizes sentimental fiction as the stories “of children learning how to feel right about their families, selves, nation, and God in the face of great pain” (1). Education here is ideological, and the student is transformed – and saved – through the teacher’s intervention.

Such transformation is evident as well in Harriet E. Wilson’s 1859 novelized autobiography *Our Nig* as the central character Frado has several teachers who make it possible for her to be transformed simultaneously into an educated woman and a Christian. First, is the schoolteacher who intervenes after the child is so harassed on her way to school that she “felt that her anticipations of pleasure at such a place were far from being realized” (31-32). Harassed as she is by the other children, she plans on leaving school until the teacher intervenes and shames the other children by “remind[ing] them of their duties to the poor and friendless; their cowardice in attacking a young innocent child; referred them to one who looks not on outward appearances, but on the heart” (32). Wilson deftly uses the teacher here to weave together a defense of mixed-race schooling by alluding to Jesus, who would see skin color as mere “outward appearance.” Reading and studying for Frado are ways to tend to her soul, as well as ways to express her resistance to her cruel mistress:

Frado had merged into womanhood, and, retaining what she had learned, in spite of the few privileges enjoyed formerly, was striving to enrich her mind. Her school-books were her constant companions, and every leisure moment was

applied to them . . . She had her book always fastened open near her, where she could glance from toil to soul refreshment. (115-116)

It is no accident that literacy activity is equated here with “soul refreshment” – literacy narratives often entwine literacy and the health of the soul. Significantly, Frado is a diligent and enthusiastic student; schooling is not in fact experienced by her as a form of social control; after all, her studies take her away from the “toil” which is supposed to be her whole world. Frado’s participation in both literacy and religious activities in this sense can be read as not only acceptance of Christian principles but also as defiance and resistance to larger cultural ends.

James, who is a member of the family Frado works for, hopes that Frado’s religious literacy education would cause her “desolate heart” to be “gladdened, quieted, [and] sustained” (69). James hopes that religious faith will guide Frado through her tribulations and make it possible for her to find peace. Even though James finds Frado’s social position unjust, his only way to help her is to encourage her to pursue her religious and literacy studies, hoping that these studies would transform her into the kind of person who can survive difficult trials. He holds out hope that these studies could potentially also set her up for a better situation in the world. James, for instance, “felt sure there were elements in her heart which, *transformed* and *purified* by the gospel would make her worthy of the esteem and friendship of the world” (69) (my italics). James imagines that through reading the gospel, the girl will be transformed and that this transformation would “make her worthy” of the world’s esteem. Although Frado may become worthy of esteem, her status as a mixed-race girl renders it unlikely that she would necessarily be shown the esteem which she has earned. Because of this, James focuses primarily on encouraging Frado to develop attributes which would aid her in facing a hostile world. He believes that her “kind, affectionate heart, native wit, and common sense, and the pertness she

sometimes exhibited . . . if *restrained properly*, might become useful in originating a self-reliance which would be of service to her in after years (69) (my italics). Frado's "pertness" here is material to be refashioned into "self-reliance." Reading the scriptures is the method for "restraining" or redirecting pertness.

Frado's need for the steadying influence of faith in Jesus resonates with Ellen's similar need in *The Wide, Wide World* and Gerty's need in *The Lamplighter*. We are told, for instance, in *The Lamplighter* that Gerty's educational and religious tutor, Emily, recognizes that only "the power of Christian humility, engrafted into the heart, -- the humility of *principle*, of *conscience*" could restrain Gerty's major faults: pride and an "easily-roused temper" (73). Christianity in these texts is a force for both restraining misplaced pertness and pride even as it endows the girls with the strength of principle. In the two examples above, Christianity is figured as working directly on the heart: in Frado's case "purifying" it, in Gerty's case being "engrafted" onto it. In both cases, these internal transformations, incorporated as they are with educational and spiritual pursuits, are welcomed by the girls.

However, Frado has material obstacles to living her transformed life that Gerty or even Ellen do not. While Ellen's learning is complicated by her Aunt Fortune's Yankee hardness, Frado is in constant threat, physically and emotionally, from Mrs. Belmont. Indeed, Wilson leaves it to Mrs. Belmont to underscore the relationship between education and religion in one of her rants against Frado. She says, "I have let Nig go out to evening meeting a few times, and, if you will believe it, I found her reading the Bible to-day, just as though she expected to turn pious nigger, and preach to white folks. So now you see what good comes of sending her to school" (88). The threat here is not rebellion per se but the possibility that literate engagement with religion could produce intellectual independence.

Frado, indeed, capitalizes on this potential. In an interesting reversal of the typical gendered (not to mention, racialized) power dynamics within tutorial relationships, Frado catechizes her semi-filial tutor James:

“Oh, I wish I had my mother back; then I should not be kicked and whipped so. Who made me so?”

“God;” answered James.

‘Did God make you?’

‘Yes.’

“Who made Aunt Abby?”

‘God.’

‘Did the same God that made her make me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, then, I don’t like him.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he made her white, and me black. Why didn’t he made us *both* white?’

‘I don’t know; try to go to sleep, and you will feel better in the morning.’

Was all the reply he could make to her knotty queries. (51)

Frado is presented here as leading a “knotty” theological inquiry – a critical catechism. In catechizing James, a son in the family she is indentured to, Frado uses reason to expose the incompatibility of the theology both she and James ascribe to with the racial inequality that is a stark reality both within their household and in the world outside it.

Much later, when Frado finds herself in New England, pregnant and abandoned by her new husband, she writes a poem in a letter to her mother that demonstrates the shift in her theological assessment of her existence. Two middle stanzas in her five stanza poem read:

Dids't thou not nourish and sustain

My infancy and youth?

Have I not testimonials plain,

Of thy unchanging truth?

-----

Though I've no home to call my own,

My heart shall not repine;

The saint may live on earth unknown,

And yet in glory shine. (136)

This poem is included in the Appendix, and it is one of many documents, including letters and personal testimony, that are meant as markers of the narrative's veracity. The poem is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it demonstrates the evolution in Frado's relationship to God and hardship; instead of questioning the goodness or justice of a God that would allow her grave misfortune, the adult Frado has learned to focus on the "testimonials" of the "truth." This stance represents a partial shift from evaluating the divine through the rewards or punishments an individual feels is meted out to her to a focus on a revealed truth that exists outside the individual. Second, the poem is notable as an engagement with literacy. Frado is literally "inspired" to compose the poem by the first verse she sees in opening her Bible: "I am poor and needy, yet the Lord thinketh upon me'" (135). The "nourishment" that Frado remembers in her youth comes both from her patrons and her Bible-reading. In the main narrative, we are



reminded that Frado's Bible is a constant companion that bears her up through hardship. This relationship with reading is very intimate – the text is ingested. Frado also testifies to the nurturance she received by composing text herself. The poem is similar to a hymn; it is general enough to appeal to many readers or listeners and it proclaims a faith in God unshaken by worldly circumstance. When Frado lives in the North, she tutors her (white) friend, passing on the religiously-inflected literacy instruction she had received herself:

Expert with the needle, Frado soon equaled her instructress; and she sought also to teach her the value of useful books; and while one read aloud to the other of deeds historic and names renowned, Frado experienced a new impulse. She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she had long felt, but could not express. Every leisure moment was carefully applied to self-improvement, and a devout and Christian exterior invited confidence from the villagers. (124-125)

Frado, like many characters in these novels becomes a literacy worker. By teaching, Frado is further enlightened, a side-effect of literacy instruction that appears in both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*. Her studies afford her a respected public persona; in effect, her literacy grants her a public personhood, even in the racist North.

### **3.2 THE MORAL AUTHORITY OF THE EVANGELICAL LITERACY STUDENT**

Balancing religion's role in both private and public realms has vexed American history since its founding as a nation without an established religion. Perhaps it is because religion's place in American society has been so contested, so ambiguous, that it has been a lever that

disenfranchised characters, like those in this chapter, could use to occupy both private and public spaces. While literary critics have established links between Christianity and the nineteenth-century novels derided as “sentimental,” “domestic,” or “women’s fiction,” even those critics invested in reclaiming this fiction struggle to accommodate the evangelicalism embedded in these texts. Tompkins writes, for instance, that:

Antebellum critics and readers did not distinguish sharply between fiction and what we would now call religious propaganda. [Susan] Warner, for instance, never referred to her books as ‘novels,’ but called them stories, because, in her eyes, they functioned in the same way as Biblical parables . . . [S]entimental novelists wrote to educate their readers in Christian perfection and to move the nation as a whole closer to God. (*Sentimental* 149)

By identifying the evangelical message pursued by some “sentimental novelists” as “propaganda” Tompkins betrays her unease with the supposed-conservatism of evangelical Protestantism. However, what makes these novels so interesting, especially when read in relation to tract society literature, is that evangelical literacy activities in the novels are often represented as potentially authorizing disempowered characters to resist powerful institutions or figures of authority. The ways evangelical literacy activities are represented in these novels are complex and a far cry from either the simplicity of propaganda or from the straightforward didacticism of the tract literature.

Even Tompkins, who has been instrumental in arguing that “sentimental” fiction is worthy of critical attention, falls into equating the evangelicalism in this literature with conservatism. Ironically, this equation is yet another unfortunate aftershock of the book that Tompkins’s work most vigorously argues against: Ann Douglas’s problematic *Feminization of*

*American Culture*, which establishes the claim that women, joined in a pact with Protestantism, midwifed banal consumerism through evangelical sentimentalism. Douglas, for instance, writes that, “Many of the ladies [sic] who penned the best-sellers of the day saw themselves in quasi-clerical terms” (109). She attempts to prove this claim by quoting prominent nineteenth-century minister William Ellery Channing who wrote that women novelists were “evangelists,” and “teachers of nations” (qtd. in Douglas 109). For critics who necessarily equate institutions such as the home, the church, and the school with oppression, women working as “evangelists” and “teachers” would be the handmaidens of hegemony.

Many of the books that figure reading and writing as central to the storyline revolve around a character who would be read as “conservative” since she solicits the admiration of teachers -- and the reader -- through her studious diligence and thirst for knowledge. In “sentimental” novels, the eager student is a young female. Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchanan argues, for example, that literacy narratives “not only reflected the dominant discourse but also socialized the reader by creating the same desires in them that control them” (10). Reading, for Aliaga-Buchanan, is “empowering” when it “changes . . . consciousness,” but it “restabilizes” the social order when reading produces “self-reform” (35, 88). Perhaps not surprisingly, Aliaga-Buchanan suggests that white, female characters are often at the center of literacy narratives that “restabilize” and promote self-reform. Her bogey is *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a text that continually crops up in nineteenth-century literacy narratives, assuming that the presence of Bunyan’s text is disciplining, conservative, and inhibiting. And yet, as Catherine Hobbs has pointed out, “[b]oth black and white women often resisted the intended uses of the literacy they were taught in order to achieve social reform instead of social control” (10).

To contemporary eyes, nineteenth-century religiously-inflected literacy instruction is anything but “liberatory,” “consciousness-raising,” or “empowering,” except, notably, for African-Americans. When Edward Gordon and Elaine Gordon write that “[i]t was impossible for the evangelical mind to distinguish the instruction of basic literacy and Christian character formation,” they understand Christian character to be highly-disciplined, submissive, and unquestioning (89). Linda Kerber shares this assumption, writing that Louisa May Alcott’s “[little] women do not find freedom in Bunyan; they do not find in their Puritan heritage that they need to seize their day, to make America their own, to connect themselves to the destiny which is manifest, to the American dream. Instead they find ever repeated images of restraint, resignation, and endurance” (166). Kerber’s frustration with the little women’s lessons in restraint is echoed by other critics who find in mid-nineteenth century novels a raft of pious female characters remarkable for their self-abnegation.

White, male students are often represented in contra-distinction to the eager student type (think here of *Huckleberry Finn*) and, as others have demonstrated, the reluctant male student represents another kind of ideal – vigorous American masculinity: the refusal of what Twain’s narrator Huck called emasculating “sivilizing.” However, as Lora Romero has pointed out, critics “have used domesticity and its cultural offspring (denominated variously as ‘sentimentalism,’ ‘women’s fiction,’ or ‘the domestic novel’) in order to demarcate a stable divide between a canonically ‘subversive’ (male) high cultural tradition and a ‘conservative’ (female and lower class) popular cultural tradition” (1). In this formulation, the novels that I look at here by white female authors are always already imagined as stabilizing rather than radically altering or resisting dominant ideology. Thus, for example, uncertain economic and marital positions are resolved prototypically through middle-class marriages. Yet,

representations of African-American literacy students also deploy the typology of the eager student – after all, historically, “former slaves recalled their determination to learn to read the Bible as an act of rebellion against white oppression” (Cornelius 4).

Frederick Douglass, for instance, writes of the “ardent desir[e] to learn” displayed by his pupils at an illegal Sunday school he runs. He writes,

These dear souls came not to Sabbath school because it was popular to do so, nor did I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race . . . I have the happiness to know that several of those who came to Sabbath school learned how to read; and that one, at least, is now free through my agency. (402)

Douglass underscores the dedication mustered by slaves who risk bodily harm “because they wished to learn.” For Douglass and his comrades, literacy education could potentially be literally liberatory. The literacy student in such scenes of instruction is a steward of Protestant moral consciousness for a larger cultural milieu; she stands as an exemplar, a public figure who exerts moral suasion.

This moral authority is often located in figures, such as young girls and old slaves, who would be judged the most lowly by worldly standards. Linda Brent, for example, offers Uncle Fred, a slave who “thought he should know how to serve God better if he could only read the Bible,” as an exemplar in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) (521). When Brent begins

tutoring Uncle Fred, she emphasizes the dangers he undertakes by defying the laws against slaves learning to read (521). Although he is taking his life in his hands, his enthusiasm is undiminished since his primary motivation for learning to read harkens back to one of the foundational principles of the Reformation – that an individual should have direct access to the Bible. This scene is similar to a scene in Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* in which he relates how, soon after learning to read, he becomes deeply attached to a “good old colored man,” Uncle Lawson (167). Douglass recounts: “[t]he old man could read a little, and I was a great help to him, in making out the hard words, for I was a better reader than he. I could teach him ‘*the letter*,’ but he could teach me ‘*the spirit*’” (167). Literacy is a spiritual imperative – and this argument is advanced through many such scenes of literacy instruction.

As a good Christian, Brent’s Uncle Fred is willing – like Douglass and his students -- to defy the law and risk bodily harm to learn to read. He proves himself to be a diligent student, and Brent finds his progress “astonishing.” Uncle Fred interprets his progress as evidence of divine intervention: “‘You nebber gibs me a lesson dat I don’t pray to God to help me to understan’ what I spells and what I reads. And he does help me, chile” (522). Literacy education is so intertwined with religion here that God is positioned as a kind of literacy tutor. God demonstrates his love and beneficence to his children by helping those denied reading and writing.<sup>31</sup>

Recognizing that the scenes of evangelical literacy instruction penned by African American writers offered strategic ways by which characters could authorize themselves to critique institutions should prompt us to re-evaluate how the middle-class women writers were deploying a related discourse about evangelicalism and education. After all, there are many similarities in the ways these writers represent evangelical literacy. Both white women and

African American men and women, for instance, describe the use of the Bible, hymns, secular literature and textbooks in their scenes of reading and writing instruction and depict literacy students as moral exemplars.

Across the genres, these students are eager to embrace literacy education, and they equally eagerly embrace the religious epistemologies underlying this education. However, the literary critical history that elevates what is seen as a vigorous (masculine) rejection of (feminized) domesticity – and both religion and education are “feminized” in this conceptualization -- would code this eagerness as conservative, especially in texts by and about white women (Baym *Feminism* 9). In this formulation texts by and/or about African Americans are exceptions, since literacy – in the case most obviously of slaves – is clearly acquired at great cost. I suggest, however, that the literacy narratives I discuss here work with similar discourses about the desirability of literacy education. Likewise, these narratives also share discourses about how this education makes possible – and even necessary – challenges to corrupt authority and doctrine.

Literacy narratives that condemn slavery are the most dramatic examples of literature using claims about spirituality and literacy to challenge the authority of powerful institutions. Linda Brent, for example, offers a pedagogical moment to mount a devastating critique of the failings of American clergy to oppose slavery. Through a scene of spiritually-motivated literacy instruction, she condemns the complicity of religious institutions with slavery. After describing her instruction of Uncle Fred, she writes:

Are doctors of divinity blind, or are they hypocrites? I suppose some are the one, and some the other; but I think if they felt the interest in the poor and lowly, that they ought to feel, they would not be so *easily* blinded . . . There is a great

difference between Christianity and religion in the south. If a man goes to the communion table, and pays money into the treasury of the church, no matter if it be the price of blood, he is called religious. If a pastor has offspring by a woman not his wife, the church dismisses him, if she is a white woman; but if she is colored, it does not hinder his continuing to be their good Shepherd. (523-524)

Brent allows for only two possibilities in her critique of “doctors of divinity”: that they are blind or hypocrites. Either case carries her indictment that they do not feel what “they ought to feel.” In this formulation, Brent uses the language of feeling, of sympathy, and thus “sentimentalism” in order to establish her claim that Christianity, particularly in the South, is corrupt. Remarkably, Brent, as a character in this narrative, authorizes herself to publicly critique the hypocrisy of religious institutions despite her marginal position in legal society.<sup>32</sup> She does so by appealing to a post-Reformation understanding of the role of reading in the life of the soul. She uses this doctrinal point to pierce the hypocrisy of those who support missionary activities. She writes,

There are thousands, who, like good Uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life; but the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it. They send the bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slave-holders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it was wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all mean are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his



brother. Tell them they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it. (522-523).

Brent equates slaveholders – and by extension the clergy who defend slavery – with savages and heathens. It is the slaveholders who are in need of an American Christian civilizing mission. Her admonishing rhetoric, phrased as commands, places Brent in the tradition of Biblical prophets and Protestant dissenters. The right to knowledge is at the heart of her critique; her rhetoric about refreshing thirsting souls with the “Fountain of Life” resonates with Frado’s declaration that her reading is “soul nourishment” in *Our Nig*. The distinction between “knowledge” or the “Fountain of Life” and the Bible is blurred within the continuum of this rhetoric. Literacy – recognized as a fundamental right and responsibility in Protestant traditions – becomes a tool for chipping away not only at slavery but also at the racist assumptions that make slavery possible.

Brent extends this critique of racism, religious hypocrisy, and slavery by using these failures to unfavorably compare the United States to European countries. Particular religious hypocrisy is cast as an American failing, for instance, when she writes that her welcome at the church in Steventon, England challenged the “prejudice against the Episcopal church” she had developed in the American south (645). Her sojourn in England provides her with ammunition with which to fortify her critique of American failures. She compares the fate of the poorest European peasants to that of American slaves, much to America’s detriment.<sup>33</sup> She focuses on two main points to prove her claim that “the most ignorant and the most destitute of these peasants was a thousand fold better off than the most pampered American slave” (645). One, that familial relations were “sacred,” and, two, that

[m]uch was being done to enlighten these poor people. Schools were established among them, and benevolent societies were active in their efforts to ameliorate their condition. There was no law forbidding them to learn to read and write; and if they helped each other in spelling out the Bible, they were in no danger of thirty-nine lashes, as was the case with myself and poor, pious Uncle Fred (645).

Literacy education is at the heart of Brent's arguments about the relative health and worth of societies. Finally, Brent's argument is also about interpretation; she is claiming an authoritative reading of the Bible against the apologies for slavery that complicit clergy also locate in the Bible.

This critique surfaces also in *Dred*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1856 novel which harshly condemns religious complicity in slavery. The mulatto slave, Harry, who has joined a cell of resisters, assesses this injustice in a letter:

'But, of all the injuries and insults that are heaped upon us, there is nothing to me so perfectly maddening as the assumption of your religious men, who maintain and defend this enormous injustice by the Bible. We have all the right to rise against them that they had to rise against England. They tell us the Bible says, 'Servants, obey your masters.' Well, the Bible says, also, 'The powers that be are ordained of God, and whoso resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of god.' If it was right for them to resist the ordinance of God, it is right for us. If the Bible does justify slavery, why don't they teach us to read it? And what's the reason that two of the greatest insurrections came from men who read scarcely anything else but the Bible? No, the fact is, they don't believe this themselves. If they did, they would try the experiment fairly of giving the Bible to their slaves. I can

assure you the Bible looks as different to a slave from what it does to a master, as everything else in the world does.’ (436).

The right to literacy is the lynchpin in Harry’s argument about the immorality of slavery’s apologists. He argues that slavery is propped up by gross and willful misreadings of the Bible. Furthermore, he is aware that the reader’s position affects his reading of a text – that texts are not stable. What, then, is to be done about competing interpretations? Stowe dramatizes this question in two chapters of *Dred*, “The Clerical Conference” and “The Result,” in which clergy from the old and new schools of Presbyterians meet to try to end a schism formed around the meaning of words like “moral” and “evil.” The majority of the clerics Stowe characterizes in these chapters are narrow-minded in their allegiance to a church that they associate with the nation. Dr. Calker expounds,

There never was any instrumentality raised up by Providence to bring in the latter day equal to the Presbyterian church in the United States of America. It is the great hope of the world; for here, in this country, we are trying the great experiment for all ages; and, undoubtedly, the Presbyterian church comes the nearest perfection of any form of organization possible to our frail humanity. It is the ark of the covenant for this nation, and for all nations. Missionary enterprises to foreign countries, tract societies, home missionaries, seamen’s friend societies, Bible societies, Sunday-school unions, all are embraced in its bosom; and it grows in a free country, planted by God’s own right hand . . . (426)

The millennial, nationalistic zeal associated here with the church is easily recognizable today. At the heart of Stowe’s critique of the clerical establishment in these two chapters is an argument that the clerics are bad readers. They won’t take a moral stand even about the rights of slaves to

literacy because, ironically, they cannot trust other readers to come to the one interpretation they claim is plainly in the Bible. For instance, the anti-intellectual father Bonnie argues,

‘I don’t believe anything that can’t be got out of a plain English Bible . . .Why, is it not plain enough to any reader of the Bible, how the apostles talked to the slaves? They didn’t fill their heads with studies about the rights of man . . .now, just let me read you, “*Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal.*” Sho! sho! that isn’t the place I was thinking of. It’s here, “*Servants, obey your masters!*” There’s into them, you see! . . .Now, these abolitionists won’t even allow that we are masters!’ (428)

Stow demonstrates that reading is a complicated business; after all, the two quotations from the Gospel do seem contradictory. Only an ideologue like father Bonnie imagines that texts are transparent and stable, even in the face of evidence to the contrary<sup>34</sup>. This, then, potentially explains Stowe’s interest in representing literacy instruction in her novels. Since teaching reading and writing is so often in the hands – historically and in Stowe’s novels – of women and older children, we might see Stowe making an argument here not only for a complex understanding of reading but also for respect for those who teach literacy.<sup>35</sup>

These texts defend their sympathetic characters’ rejection of American law and authority by arguing that this law is contrary to God’s will. The same Christian principles that authorize these characters’ covert literacy activities also authorize their critiques and resistances to civil law, national policy and even religious doctrines. In Stowe’s *Dred* Miss Anne, a reluctant slaveowner’s sister, articulates this connection: “there ought to be no inevitable condition that makes it necessary to dwarf a human mind. Any condition which makes a full development of the powers that God has given us a misfortune, cannot, certainly, be a healthy one –cannot be

right” (315-316). Anne’s rhetoric assumes the full humanity of the slaves, forcing her interlocutor to see them as people and creatures of God. Further, her rhetoric assumes that God wants all people to be educated; since God made all humans as rational creatures, to stunt the mind is to work against His plan.

Less is obviously at stake in literacy narratives that don’t take up the issue of slavery. Nonetheless, these texts also connect literacy education with Christianity and further task the student with resisting corrupt authority figures. In *The Lamplighter* and in *The Wide, Wide World* the young heroines’ primary literacy tutors also serve as their religious educators, and both girls have to defy temporal authority to remain obedient to spiritual duty. In *The Lamplighter*, Gerty is adopted by her literacy and religious tutor, Emily. Emily’s father, Mr. Graham, intends for Gerty to accompany their family on a pleasure trip when Gerty intends to undertake the care of a sick friend and to start teaching at a girls’ school. Gerty declines Mr. Graham’s invitation because she feels that her duty dictates she undertake this other work. After Mr. Graham abuses her for her choice and threatens to disown her, Gerty thinks:

‘Does he consider that my freedom is to be the price of my education, and am I no longer to be able to say yes or no? . . . [I]t would be tyranny in Mr. Graham to insist upon my remaining with them, and I am glad I have resolved to break away from such thralldom. Besides, I was educated to teach . . . It is cruel in Mr. Graham to try to deprive me of my free-will.’ (143).

With Gerty’s refusal to let the price of her education be her submission to her benefactor’s authority, the text suggests that education should not and does not always serve the interests of those who pay for or encourage education. Because Gerty’s resistance to Mr. Graham’s authority is prompted by her sense of obligation -- her duty to earn her living and care for sick

friends – her discourse about “freedom” and “free will” is circumscribed by her sense of right and wrong. Her understanding of free will burdens her with obligations that actually demand more from her physically and emotionally than Mr. Graham’s injunctions would. Gerty’s moral authority in this contest challenges not only the hierarchical dynamics of age and gender, but also of class. Gerty is a street urchin, rescued from the tenements and an abusive foster mother by an illiterate lamplighter, Uncle True. The Grahams patronize Gerty and True at first as charity; Emily only incorporates Gerty into their lives after finding her to have a “keen intelligence” (70). (Of course, the truth will out at the end that Gerty’s father is the Grahams’ equal, and he will marry Emily, who is also his long-lost love.)

In *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen finds her religious devotions attacked by the wealthy Scottish relatives who adopt her. Her imperious grandmother forbids her from using the morning for prayer and reading, arguing that Ellen needs more sleep. The teenager defies her grandmother; she confesses her defiance, saying, “I thing [sic] it is right to disobey if I am told to do what is wrong” (542). Ellen’s hour of study is returned to her after her father, whom she begins to teach to love hymns, intervenes (545). Elsie in *Elsie Dinsmore* faces a similar challenge when her father demands she break the Sabbath to play the piano for his guests. Elsie, who has made a study of pleasing her father, defies him and stoically endures his public humiliation because, “‘Jesus says, ‘He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me;’ and I cannot disobey Him, even to please my own dear papa’” (225). Elsie later fears that her father will restrict her reading of the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, texts he fears make her “gloomy,” but by involving him in her religious reading, Elsie accustoms him to her religious devotion (264). One of the tell-tale signs of Elsie Dinsmore’s “very lovely and well-developed Christian character” is the fact that she is “very diligent in her studies” (28). This kind of

studious diligence and heightened sense of religious duty reads today as highly conservative in that it seems to privilege the adoption of dominant values; however, the diligence and obedience that mark Elsie, Ellen, and Gerty also enable them to successfully resist figures of patriarchal authority. If the hierarchy of the Protestant household can be understood as a synchecdoche for the organization of power relations in the public realm, these girls' resistance harkens back to the tradition of religious dissenters defying governmental authority.

Clearly, the literacy narratives I discuss here that are not concerned with slavery make different kinds of interventions into matters of public concern than those that are. While I have explored how Stowe and Brent, in particular, use literacy as a wedge to open up critiques of American religious institutions, other writers, such as Lucy Larcom, Cummins, and Warner use literacy as the shuttle with which they weave together arguments about women's roles in determining American class structure. Lucy Larcom's 1889 autobiography, *A New England Girlhood*, puts reading and writing at the center of her life, from infancy to adulthood.<sup>36</sup> It is a reader's memoir – a life told through the texts read, the writing done. Larcom's memoir defies expectation we might bring to a story about a woman's journey from an idyllic, agrarian, highly-literate childhood to an adulthood spent working in mills and schools in the west. Larcom's childhood is certainly recounted lovingly enough, but there is no overarching nostalgia for a world "lost" to industrialization. Instead, Larcom argues against the "classifications" made by occupation, arguing that "[s]he is really the superior person who has accepted her work and is doing it faithfully, whatever it is. This designation by their casual employments prevents one from making real distinction, from knowing persons as persons" (200-201). Larcom's argument that occupation – particularly of women, who move fluidly in and out of employment – cannot

indicate the quality of a person. Instead, the individual demonstrates their values through attention to duty and through a literate life. Larcom writes:

I do not believe that any Lowell mill-girl was ever absurd enough to wish to be known as a 'factory-lady,' although most of them knew that 'factory-girl' did not represent a high type of womanhood in the Old World. But they themselves belonged to the New World, not to the Old; and they were making their own traditions to hand down to their republican descendants, one of which was and is that honest work has no need to assert itself or to humble itself in a nation like ours, but simply to take its place as one of the foundation-stones of the Republic.  
(201)

Larcom's defense of "honest work" claims for the Lowell girls the same mantle of nationalistic virtue associated with mothers shaping "republican descendents." She maps occupational class distinctions onto a geographic distinction between Old and New Worlds. While Larcom may argue against classifications, she does value most highly those individuals who live lives informed by reading and writing. By doing so, she connects hard work and literacy to nationalism. She writes, for instance, that reading poetry helped "in my questioning as to the meaning of life, to get glimpses of its true definition from the poets – that it is love, service, the sacrifice of self for others' good" (177). Larcom's appeal to "service" and "sacrifice" re-frame her history of work within idioms that appear in representations of evangelical literacy. Most important, though, is her claim to have found the meaning of life through the poets: her memoir is, in fact, a curriculum for life. Reading is at the heart of this life, and although Larcom finds meaning in presumably secular poets, she insists elsewhere on the seamlessness between her literacy activities and her spiritual life. When she and her companions who also worked at the



Lowell mills continue their educations and also write and publish literary magazines, she explains that “[w]ork, study, and worship were interblended” (209). The mill girls’ literary activities were literally located within religious organizations: “The two magazines published by the mill-girls, the ‘Lowell Offering’ and the ‘Operatives’ Magazine’ originated with literary meetings in the vestry of two religious societies, the first in the Universalist Church, the second in the First Congregational” (209-210).

In *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen’s interest in reading and writing also intersect with issues of class. She tutors both wild child Nancy and yeoman Van Brunt; by teaching them to read, she converts them to Christianity. One of Ellen’s early failings, however, is her lazy response to a “poor Irishman, whose uncouth attempts at a letter Ellen had once offered to write out and make straight for him” (462). Although Ellen spends time trying to teach simple, American-born Van Brunt, Ellen does not attempt to teach Anthony Fox how to write; instead, she attempts to extract herself from the relationship she has begun as a scribe, complaining: “I think I have had my share. You don’t know what a piece of work it is, to copy out one of those scrawls. It takes me ever so long in the first place to find what he has written, and then to put it so that any one else can make sense of it – I’ve got about enough of it” (462). Ellen is ordered to continue to serve as Fox’s scribe by John, who is perhaps sensitive to his father’s successful deathbed conversion of a young, Irish child.

Ellen’s actions can be read as part of Warner’s argument, in this novel, about the formation of American identity. The novel is peopled with immigrants, including the Swiss woman who tutors Ellen and Alice in French and the young Irish boy who converts to Protestantism on his deathbed. Ellen becomes a conduit for American identity, passing on her religious and literacy education and marrying English-born John. Ellen’s Americanness is

certainly linked with her Protestantism, although it is never clear what denomination she or John belong to.

Intriguingly, Ellen's class position is ambiguous: she is the child of a Scotch aristocrat and a ruined New York businessman; she is taken in by her hardworking, Yankee aunt who owns and manages a farm; and she later lives the life of an aristocrat in Scotland. Through her travails, Ellen is judged by the characters who occupy the moral center of the book – Alice and John – for her perseverance and faith. By placing Ellen in a changing series of class positions, Warner suggests, like Larcom, that class is potentially fluid for women – or, at least, that class is not a true compass with which to steer one's evaluation of character by. Indeed, the material realities Ellen's shifting class status are treated as obstacles she must overcome in her quest to be a religious woman. Both writers insist, like all of the writers in this chapter, on the central importance of a literate, religious life. Status here is judged not by wealth or, as Armstrong argues – for British novels -- “psychological depth,” but by what we might call “literate-spiritual depth” (20).

### **3.3 EVANGELICAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION: A DIFFERENT KIND OF LIBERATORY PEDAGOGY?**

While Charles Dickens's dystopian schoolrooms dominate literary historical memories of instruction in nineteenth-century literature, schooling, in American fiction of the same period, is just as likely to take place in the home as a separate school house. In British literature, there is a more distinct line drawn between home schooling and the school as an institution, with schools for boys existing separate from the catch-as-catch-can schooling girls may pick up in their home

spaces: I think here of the struggles in *The Mill on the Floss*, or the many schools for boys in British literature, including those in *Dr. Wortle's School*, *David Copperfield*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*. The gendered separation of sites of instruction in British literature perhaps reflects that nation's long history of higher education for men – think of all the brothers off at Oxbridge in Austen's novels, for example. There are exceptions, of course, schools for governesses and the utilitarian school of *Hard Times*, which engages in co-education in order to assert control over the children who will become the laboring hands in a mill town. Because of different material realities and ideological commitments, American literature tends not to draw sharp contrasts between the sites of instruction within and outside of the home.

That fiction by and about (white) women often focuses on the society of the home or the local community convinces Americanist literary critics, according to Nina Baym, that “women writers invariably represented the consensus, rather than the criticism of it” (*American* 9). Baym argues that Americanist literary scholars have mis-read fictions by women because of the critics' belief in the “myth” of an American literary tradition that celebrates the solitary, individualist (white, male) protagonist battling against the “encroaching, constricting, destroying society” that is represented “in the figure of one or more women” (12). By taking seriously, though, the conflicts set in supposedly private spaces in these novels by women writers – particularly the arguments embedded in the depiction of literacy instruction -- we can see that novels about and by women (white and black) as well as men such as Frederick Douglass, are engaged in critiquing and re-modeling the “consensus.”

Fictions that depict scenes of literacy instruction are meta-pedagogical texts. Armstrong reminds us that novels often function as pedagogical apparatuses: “[a]s education became the preferred instrument of social control, fiction could accomplish much the same purpose as the

various forms of recreation promoted by Sunday schools” (17). Although Armstrong’s view here that fiction can be an instrument of social control refers specifically to British literature in a British context, many scholars writing about American literary history also share this understanding of the ways fiction and literacy promote certain versions of subjectivity. Steven Mailloux, for instance, describes such a process in his reading of *Little Women*. He argues that the March girls’

resolutions to try harder directly follow from their repeated examinations of conscience and their frequent confessions of failure to their mother. And this secularization of Christian self-disciplining through confession is aided by the reading of books like *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Indeed, reading *as* self-reform takes place while the daughters read *about* self-reform. (“Cultural” 28-29)

The “self-disciplining” and “self-reform” Mailloux locates in scenes of reading rely on an understanding of reading as a technology which acts upon the reader; for Mailloux, like many critics, such religious-literacy technologies of the self produce constrained subjects. However, casting evangelical literacy activities as domestic, conservative, and hegemonic blinds us to the complicated ways these same activities authorize critique and resistance in some literacy narratives.

I argue, instead, that the restraint and self-abnegation practiced by the characters I discuss in this chapter are actually means through which the characters exercise power. Restraint and self-abnegation enable the literacy students in these narratives to assert power, often through resistance. Citations of *Pilgrim’s Progress* allude to a Protestant history broader than the confines of Puritan New England; after all, Bunyan belongs to a long British tradition of religious dissent, and literacy is central to this tradition of radical dissenters. This tradition is

further bolstered by allusions in nineteenth-century scenes of literacy instruction to John Foxe's sixteenth-century *Actes and Monuments*, a Protestant martyrology which celebrates the defiance of immoral state authority. This defiance is attached to reading. Foxe reports that one martyr, burned with "a company of books," defiantly reads until the smoke chokes his sight, so he dies "thanking God for sending him [a communion-book]" (qtd. Franchot 8).

Thus, while modern readers of *The Wide, Wide World* might feel, with Tompkins, "horror" at Ellen's "submissiveness and self-abnegation," we cannot accurately assess why Ellen is put through an educational program to produce her self-effacement unless we also understand the power tied to what we may see as submission and self-abnegation (585). Women have been offered novelistic models at least since *Clarissa* (and, certainly, there is a longer history of such powerful ascetic female figures as Julian of Norwich who aspire to spiritual rather than material or corporeal power); these fictional characters often function as exemplars for their fellow characters, and perhaps for the intended readership. Moreover, the female characters I look at in this chapter are not merely concerned with the spiritual realm; rather, their spirituality allows them to express concerns and take action in the material world. Even while we might cheer on the critiques and resistance offered by these characters, however, we might also find ourselves alienated when we reflect on the discourse the characters rely on to authorize these critiques. Indeed, the power exercised by these characters also re-inscribes the evangelical values of duty and submission to divine will. The evangelical literacy student is empowered because she is humbled. In the next chapter I turn to mid-nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals to further explore the figure of the Christian student embedded in an evangelical construction of literacy.

#### 4.0 MODEL LETTERS, MODEL LESSONS: LETTER-WRITING MANUALS AND VIRTUOUS CHARACTER

“[T]hrough letter writing the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity.”

--Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 48.

The evangelical literacy I have discussed in the preceding two chapters should be understood as complicating the binary between public and private spheres which has led historians such as Ronald Zboray to suggest that schools and churches – as sites where women exercised moral authority -- are located in a private sphere. In this chapter I turn to letter-writing manuals to describe more fully how the construction and maintenance of a virtuous Christian self is positioned in the first half of the nineteenth century as a project that cuts across artificial distinctions between public and private spheres.

As I have argued in the two previous chapters, representations of evangelical literacy activities often position these literacy activities, particularly reading, as modes through which the individual is transformed into a Christian subject. Early nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals were part of the cultural discourse about the use and value of literacy education, representing writing as inextricably bound with the formation and maintenance of virtuous, Christian character. Letter writing is a central literacy activity in the novels I discussed in the previous chapter. These texts include frequent mentions of letters as well as “transcripts” of

important letters, such as the deathbed letter from Ellen's mother in *The Wide, Wide World* and the letter in which Gerty's father reveals himself in *The Lamplighter*. Indeed, the disciplinary potential that scholars such as Lucille Schultz have located in letter-writing textbooks seems very similar to the ways tract society literature, conduct manuals, and sentimental literature can also be read as instructing and maintaining evangelical Protestant values (110-111).

As I did with tract society literature and "sentimental" novels, I read these manuals for how they represent literacy instruction and practice but also how the representations of these activities participate in discourses about virtue and character.<sup>37</sup> The often-overlapping claims nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals make about the importance of letter-writing as a literacy activity with moral implications are embedded in the peritextual materials, or front matter, as well as in the model letters themselves. In this way, the manuals stage scenes of instruction by describing the ways the instructors and students should use the manual and by representing literacy instruction through characters' descriptions of reading and writing under another character's influence in the model letters.<sup>38</sup>

The American letter-writing manuals are collections of model letters often forming narrative series among characters who are the writers and receivers of these letters. It is common, for instance, to have a letter from a parent followed by a letter of response from a child. These manuals often include prefaces and/or essays which establish the value of the text and suggest modes for using the text. These instructions are often addressed to teachers of youth and essentially make claims about how best to teach reading and writing.<sup>39</sup>

The genealogy for English language letter-writing manuals traces back through sixteenth-century translations of French *secrétaires* (Bannet xiii) to earlier medieval formularies used in European chancelleries (Chartier 1). Over the centuries, collections of model letters were

produced for ever-expanding readerships as collections of model letters for state business made way for manuals produced for the social elite and, then, for manuals aimed at a “wider and more diverse public” (Bannet xiii-xiv). The manuals that circulate in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth-century are the direct descendents – and often edited versions – of manuals first produced in London in the eighteenth-century.

For this chapter I examined sixteen manuals published between 1810 and 1897, although my discussion focuses primarily on five manuals: James Hardie’s *Epistolary Guide* (1817); *The Fashionable American Letter Writer* (1828); R. Turner’s *Parlour Letter-Writer and Secretary’s Assistant* (1835); a printing of the *New Universal Letter-Writer* (1836); and *Appleton’s Complete Letter Writer* (1844). I concentrate on these five manuals because they are printed in the decades preceding the Civil War when, as I have shown in previous chapters, literacy instruction is often linked with evangelical Protestant messages about virtue and morality.

Except for Hardie’s *Epistolary Guide*, the other manuals recycle and re-present model letters and other materials from other sources. Of these five manuals, Hardie’s *Epistolary Guide* is the most distinctive because Hardie seems to have fulfilled his promise to compose his own model letters. Hardie’s guide only had one printing, a fate shared by the other manual I found which did not recycle model letters from other sources: Francois Peyre-Ferry’s 1826 *The Art of Epistolary Composition*.

Although most letter-writing manuals in the first half of the nineteenth-century recycled standard model letters, with the same correspondents and events, from influential eighteenth-century manuals, changes were sometimes made through recategorization and rearrangement of types of letters; attention to place names; and, at times, revisions of particular sentences. *The New Universal Letter Writer*, for instance, is a version of Thomas Cooke’s 1772 British *The*



*Universal Letter-Writer; or New Art of Polite Correspondence* (Bannet 210).<sup>40</sup> The version I work closely with in this chapter was printed by David Hogan, a Philadelphia printer, who supplemented Cooke's letters with letters from other manuals and in particular by American writers (Bannet 214). He also, according to Eve Tavor Bannet, made morality a "thematic focus" in letters about tradesmen dealing with hard times (215).<sup>41</sup> Like tracts, letter-writing manuals circulated between England and the United States, with American publishers frequently co-opting and re-publishing texts originating in London. Bannet reports two ideological alterations American publishers undertook, in particular: the excision of political letters and an orientation to young people. I suspect these alterations have as much to do with sales as with ideology, since so many of the nineteenth-century manuals I look at make claims about an educational crisis in order to convince teachers and parents that young people need letter-writing manuals.

In the manuals' directions for composing and pedagogy, "young people" are often positioned as the primary users of the books. In order to market their usefulness to the young, these manuals often highlight the moral instruction embedded in the models.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the prefaces in many of these manuals trumpet the moral value to be gleaned from their pages. The Preface from *The Classical English Letter-Writer* (1816) claims to "inculcate, in a particularly striking and influential manner, the most important principles of virtue and piety" (iii). The author of Hardie's *Epistolary Guide* (1817) observes:

In the following letters, I have, therefore, endeavored to inculcate the loves of parents, of preceptors, of study, of country and of religion, and, according to the best of my abilities, have attempted to demonstrate to my young readers, that their happiness in this world, as well as in that which is to come, depended on their

abstaining from the least appearance of evil and on their constant perseverance in the path of virtue. (vi-vii)

The term “inculcate,” to impress upon a mind, carries with it the sense of force.<sup>43</sup> “Inculcate,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, retains the connotation from the original Latin, meaning “to tread upon.” The OED suggests that since 1550 “inculcate” has meant “[t]o endeavour to force (a thing) into or impress (it) on the mind of another by emphatic admonition, or by persistent repetition; to urge on the mind, esp. as a principle, an opinion, or a matter of belief; to teach *forcibly*” (italics mine).

Model letters thus function as stamps that repetitively impress lessons not only about skill but as importantly about virtue onto the mind of the reader. By casting this pedagogy as a stamp, the concept of “inculcating” also casts the student as both unformed and at some level resistant, matter like clay or wax that needs to be pressed to assume certain shapes. Like the more clearly evangelical literacy pedagogies I have discussed in the first two chapters, the letter-writing manuals use narratives to emphasize lessons about how the young reader/student should relate to figures of authority, to education, to religion, and to nation. In this way, narrative becomes a tool for teaching “forcibly”: lessons in virtue are starkly recommended in texts that readers may find appealing at first as entertainment.

Claims by the authors of such manuals that they play a role in inculcating virtue can be read as engaging with an evangelical Protestant discourse in which the reader recognizes her need for moral education. The “sales pitch” about the utility of and danger of neglecting an education in letter writing, which is often incorporated into the preface or introductions of these manuals, is strikingly similar across the range of manuals published between the first and last thirds of the nineteenth century. One of the central tropes one finds in reading across a selection

of letter-writing manuals published in the United States between 1810 and 1880 identifies an area of educational neglect specifically related to letter writing. Thus, we can read James Hardie expressing his regret in 1817 “that though a facility in writing letters is universally acknowledged to be an acquisition of the utmost importance, little or no attention is paid to its attainment in our select seminaries, our boarding schools, and in our academies” (viii).<sup>44</sup>

This sentiment that letter-writing, a subject of “the utmost importance,” is neglected in secondary education is echoed in the 1816 *Classical English Letter-Writer* which insists that

It seems the usual fault of those who undertake this part of education, that they propose for the exercise of their scholars, occasions which rarely happen, and neglect those without which life cannot proceed. It is possible to pass many years without the necessity of writing panegyrics or epithalamiums; but every man has frequent occasion to make a narrative of the minute incidents of common life.  
(iv-v)

This mis-education of students carries the threat of making students “idle spectators of mankind, in expectation that some great event will give them an opportunity to exert their rhetoric” (v). The letter is thus both a necessary form which will be frequently encountered and a means through which to engage with “mankind.” In this formulation an education which focuses on ceremonial forms of rhetoric are obstacles to engagement with public life. Because the letter-writer is relating “the minute incidents of common life,” he is positioned here as an active participant in a public life built not on “great events’ but on those minute incidents.

Mis-education, then, functions as educational malpractice, as schools and teachers are accused of neglecting the central object of literacy education. The 1835 edition of Turner’s *The Parlour Letter-Writer*, for instance, includes an (uncredited) essay excerpted from Hardie’s

earlier text. This essay, “Observations and Directions on the Art of Letter-Writing,” asks “How comes it then to pass that so few are capable of writing a good letter?” (17).<sup>45</sup> The answer the essay offers is that

whatever appears likely to be obtained with ease, or by common use, is in general too much disregarded. Hence the neglect of English grammar, the bad consequences of which are every day apparent; and hence, also, the little pains taken to make children expert in the art of letter-writing, which, next to speaking well, is an accomplishment of the greatest utility and importance. (17-18)

While we might suspect that the recycling of Hardie’s description of educational neglect two decades later corresponds to the dominance of a classical studies curriculum in secondary education, the letter-writing instruction continues to be framed in terms of an educational neglect fifty years later. So, for instance, J. Willis Westlake claims in *How to Write Letters* (1876) that “Nearly all the writing of most persons is in the form of letters; and yet in many of our schools this kind of composition is almost entirely neglected” (3). Like the earlier descriptions of a letter-writing neglect, this one rests on the letter’s position as the most relied on form of writing and on schools’ failures to adequately teach letter writing. Westlake attributes this failure, or what he terms “neglect,” to “the fact that heretofore there has been no complete and systematic treatise on the subject of letter-writing,” a claim that will be recycled by the writer of *Business and Social Correspondence* ten years later (3).

Indeed, as late as 1897 H.T. Loomis claims no “argument is necessary to show that a text-book on correspondence is needed. The average student can solve difficult arithmetical problems, analyze ‘Paradise Lost,’ or read Greek, before he knows the requirements of an ordinary business letter” (3). What is particularly interesting about Loomis’ *fin-de-siecle* claim

is that the reference to students being taught to analyze *Paradise Lost* reflects the nineteenth-century conflicts about the teaching of English. Here, academic flourishes, like the reading of Greek or analysis of a long poem, are positioned against the necessity to “know the requirements of an ordinary business letter.” In this formulation, English education is divided by an opposition between practical, or utilitarian, knowledge and ceremonial and literary knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

The majority of the manuals I looked at emphasize the utility of letter-writing and instruction in letter-writing. Versions of Dr. Johnson’s claim that “‘Scarcely any species of composition deserves more to be cultivated than the epistolary style, since none is of more various or frequent use, through the whole subordination of human life’” appear in title pages, preface, and introductions of divers manuals (*qtd in Classical* 1816, title page).<sup>47</sup> Letter-writing is framed in these manuals as the central literacy activity in a literate life. Thomas Cook’s *New Universal Letter Writer*, for instance, often includes this claim in the Preface: “The great utility of Epistolary Writing is so well known, that the necessity of being acquainted with an art replete with such advantages is needless to insist upon” (1810, x).<sup>48</sup> Hardie (1817) expands on this claim:

Letter writing is so manifestly the main object and design of all education, that a work, which affords some help to those, who are desirous of acquiring the knowledge of this most useful and truly important art, necessarily claims a preference over most other books. (v)

“Utility” and “art” co-exist in claims like these about letter-writing – a juxtaposition which is finely tuned to selling books since these manuals present the most common and utilitarian form of writing as an area of specialized knowledge. Indeed, manuals, as we have seen, even insist

that letter-writing should properly be schooled-knowledge and that they are regretfully combating the negligence of educational institutions.

Many of these manuals also cast a wide net, arguing that these texts – with their artful utilitarian knowledge – are necessary for men and women whatever their socio-economic status. The *New Universal Letter-Writer* (1836) argues that it will “be no disgrace to the Counting-house, -- ought not to be rejected from the Gentleman’s private Library, -- and deserves to take precedence on the *Young Lady’s Toilette*, of most of the Novels and light reading with which it is too often cumbered” (9) (boldface original). In occupying spaces from the counting house to the gentleman’s library and to the young lady’s toilette, this manual is positioned as traversing a landscape in which the boundaries between economic and social or domestic spheres are highly porous.

The same text is meant to occupy both the mercantile space of the counting house and an intimate feminine space, elbowing aside novels. In *Chesterfield’s Art of Letter-Writing Simplified* (1857) the utility of letter-writing remains constant across the classes who might use the text, although the type of utility shifts with class position:

Howsoever humble, or elevated, there is no situation of life in which the ‘art of letter-writing’ must not occasionally be found of vast importance. To the poor, it is a comfort, a solace, a blessing; with the middle and higher classes of society, it is an indispensable acquirement – an exhaustless source of enjoyment and pleasure. In youth to be regarded as an essential part of education. But, like other arts, it must be taught, or studied; for, whatever may be the scholastic advantages of the individual, it can rarely, if ever, be possessed by intuition. (5)

Here again we see claims about the “vast importance” of letter writing and the necessity of studying the “art” of letter-writing. This necessity is differentiated by socio-economic position since “the poor” need to learn the art of letter-writing for “solace” while the “middle and higher classes” need it for “enjoyment and pleasure.”

The sense that writers from different class positions have different experiences with letter-writing is further heightened in *The American Lady's and Gentleman's Modern Letter Writer*, which explains that

The following letters are meant to be adapted to the use of the middle and the lower ranks of society; and the author trusts that they may be found of service in many cases of emergency, as where the writer is pressed for time, feels himself unequal to the effort of composition, or is really unable, from want of practice, to express his desires in becoming language. (2.4)<sup>49</sup>

The manual in this case is meant to be a stop-gap, a tool for an emergency which would only occur to a member of the middle and lower “ranks” who don’t have the time, inclination, or ability to compose on their own. Even in this narrowed readership – no mention of the gentleman’s library here – the hailed readership is a diverse group which can include those with the ability but without the time to compose and those without the ability.

Because these letter-writing manuals are positioned as potentially meeting the needs of a diverse group of readers, the model letters often offer a diverse readership multiple points of entry into the narratives produced through the depiction of on-going correspondence between particular characters. In the *New Universal Letter-Writer* (1836), for instance, “Letters of Business” includes letters between, say a shopkeeper and his supplier, but also a letter “From a Father to a Son, on negligence in his affairs” and “The Son’s grateful Answer.” Readers, then,

are offered multiple identities through which they can recognize model letters which may be applicable to their lives. A father reading the text may not be in the same class position as the father in the letter, but he can still identify with the position of being a father who can reprimand a son. Women are often named in multiple ways: they are widows, mothers, and daughters, but also boarding school students, wards, “in service,” and ladies. Thus, when Turner lists “the humbler walks of life” who need his book (as opposed to generals, ambassadors, and lawyers), he names “the merchant, farmer, and mechanic, the father and mother, the son and daughter” (iii).

While many of the model letters included in manuals published in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth-century are directly borrowed, if not influenced by, the model letters in earlier British productions, some American letter manuals include sales pitches that appeal to nationalist sentiment. The *Complete American Letter-Writer* (1807), for instance, marks its examples as “not taken from the English books of forms, nor are they copied from the ignorant productions, of which we have already spoken; but are obtained from the best American authorities, and will be found in perfect conformity to the legal and customary practice of the man of business in the United States” (iii-iv). This manual characterizes these “ignorant productions” as

ridiculous trash which would disgrace the pen of a chambermaid, [and] has been imported and sold to the young Americans, garnished with some specious title, while in fact it contains no more than a useless parcel of stuff, coarsely expressed, and entirely irrelevant to the modes of doing business in this country. (iii)



Here Americans are victims of English trash peddlers who are imposing on young Americans ridiculous models letters which would make a chambermaid sniff. Not only are the British model letters “useless” and “coarse,” they are also “irrelevant” to American modes of business.

Tailoring for an American audience, while unmarked in many of the compilations Bannet examines, becomes, for Hardie’s *Epistolary Guide*, a powerful sales pitch. Hardie distinguishes his manual from his competitors by arguing that he has taken “a path very different from that of any of my predecessors, and I hope, that my work will be found more useful than theirs” (v). Although he admits to working from the examples set by Reverend David Blair, an English author of schoolbooks, he claims that the distinction between his manual and Blair’s texts are in the differences between local cultures. He writes,

The subjects of his letters are, however, in general, too trivial, and being chiefly of a local nature, would have been of no great utility to young people in the United States, had the work been reprinted in this country. The models, which are here presented, are, therefore, with very little exception, entirely new, and, I may say with confidence, that THIS BOOK IS TOTALLY UNLIKE EVERY OTHER, WHICH HAS GONE BEFORE IT. (v-vi) (emphasis in the original)

Hardie stakes the superiority of his manual on its novelty – a novelty which springs from its almost comprehensive drafting in the United States for an American audience. This utility aimed at a particular American readership is defined by Hardie as “the promotion of useful knowledge, of morality and religion” and he writes that he “will never write a line, which can have the least tendency to encourage levity, immorality or irreligion” (vi). Thus, at least for Hardie, American utility is necessarily moral and religious.

## 4.1 MANUALS AS MODES OF LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Through descriptions of teachers and students using the manual, letter-writing manuals depict scenes of instruction. These descriptions and direct instructions to teachers emphasize the importance of the teacher's role in using these manuals to learn how to write letters. There are two central ideas about literacy embedded in these instructions for teaching: the importance of frequent writing and the role reading plays in teaching people to write. The *New Universal Letter-Writer* (1836), for instance, counsels that “[t]he directions laid down in various parts of the work, for acquiring a proper degree of elegance and facility in writing letters, might be deemed sufficient, did not experience show, that to these rules, or indeed to any rules that can be given, must be added *reading and practice*” (9-10). The models themselves function as a hinge between these two central pedagogical principles. For example, Hardie combines both in his preface:

The plan of study, which I would respectfully recommend to the tutor, is to cause the pupil to transcribe every letter as an exercise, fairly and neatly in a book . . . .After the whole have been copied . . . the pupil will be qualified to produce originals from the topics for exercise beginning at page 164. The pupils will afterwards be able to invent topics and compose originals for themselves, for which purpose they should be encouraged to correspond, frequently with their parents, relations or friends, on miscellaneous subjects.” (viii)

In this plan of study the student is first a reader and transcriber of models before s/he becomes a composer of original prose. Since, as we have seen, reading is a highly charged act, revealing the character of the writer and influencing the character of the reader, the manuals often underscore the morals, virtue, and religious values embedded in their models.

As in the tracts, the content is a vehicle for moral education, because it determines who the reader will become as a writer. Text is incorporated by the reader through the act of reading; and the virtues promoted by the content are essentially the nutritional value of the incorporated text. Hardie insists that

we must not expect [the student] to invent matter; what they write must be infused into them, and what we infuse must be of the easiest kind, and so connected, that one part will naturally suggest another. When a subject is thus prepared, it will be easy even for a child to commit the same to writing, and then once a habit of doing this is acquired, the greatest difficulty is over. By degrees, they will soon be able to devise a subject for themselves. (ix)

The subjects appropriate to letters are “infused” in the student through the model letters; and through practice, the student acquires the habit of reproducing independent subjects informed by the models. As with the term “inculcated,” the “infused” student is described as material that needs to be transformed.

The early manuals do not have exercises for writers; instead, students of letter-writing are encouraged to learn to compose letters by imitating or copying the model letters in these texts. As a form of literacy practice, copying model letters is related to the practice of memorization and recitation I have discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the representations of literacy practice with hymns in the tracts. Copying and memorization are processes through which the student is expected to incorporate both form and content: incorporation both of the formal qualities of the models but also, potentially of the cultural values embedded in the content. Lucille Schultz, for instance, writes that instruction in letter writing was

equated with inculcating . . . the manners and morals of polite society . . .  
[I]nstruction for how to write a letter, the one genre that would have an audience  
outside the classroom, became a trope for instruction in behaving according to the  
culture's dominant values, and the appearance of the letter became a trope, a  
metonymy, for the writer's character. (110-111)

It is through this attention to the formation of character, that the letter-writing manuals relate to the evangelical literacy. The virtuous and dutiful character recommended through model letters bears a strong resemblance to the evangelical literacy students in the tracts and literature I discussed in earlier chapters. This suggests, to the extent these representations of virtuous and dutiful students overlap, that qualities central to the evangelical literacy were “the culture's dominant values.”

The pen and hand in the case of copying model letters, then, are together a form of technology that potentially transforms the writer. The next step implied by the processes of recitation and copying is interpretation as written “[i]mitation was supposed to advance, with a pupil's growing proficiency, through rewording and then through the variation, connection, amplification, inversion or radical adaptation of the model or models in use, to their ‘improvement’ and creative transformation” (Bannet xii). Because of this focus on imitation and modeling and also improvisation, lessons in virtue were embedded in model letters, particularly since letters are frequently compared to mirrors or portraits of character. R. Turner writes, for example, that “Let [the pupil] know, that when he writes what is to be sent to another, he is drawing a picture of his own mind, and that he ought to be desirous of rendering it an agreeable likeness” (20).

The contention that the writer reveals himself through letter-writing is related to the convention repeated almost universally in letter-writing manuals that good letters are natural conversations with the absent reader. Many manuals reproduce versions of the claim that

A correspondence between two persons, is simply a conversation reduced to writing; in which one party says all that he has to communicate, replies to preceding inquiries, and, in his turn, proposes questions, without interruption by the other; who takes precisely the same course in his answer. We should write to an absent person, as we would speak to the same party if present. (*New Universal*, 1836, 12)

The metaphor of letter-writing and reading as conversation is an attempt to bridge what Giles Constable calls the “epistolary gap,” the distance in space and time between writer and reader (14). William Merrill Decker goes as far as arguing that “[f]or some [early American] writers, the posting or receipt of a letter was so closely associated with transcending the separations inherent to mortal life that the epistolary exchange intrinsically constituted a religious experience” (74).

This “religious experience” is embedded, according to Decker, in the frequent allusions to “Paul’s rhetorical position of being ‘absent in body, but present in spirit’” in the epistolary gospels (74).<sup>50</sup> And, in fact, Thomas Cook’s *New Universal Letter Writer* (1810) reminds readers that “[s]ome of the most ancient compositions were written [as letters], and the light of the Gospel was delivered by the holy Apostles in the Epistolary way” (x). *Appleton’s Complete Letter Writer* of 1844 expands on the spiritual potential of epistolary correspondence, alluding to the Pauline trope of spiritual rather than physical communion in the “Introductory remarks”:

An epistolary correspondence between intimate and endeared connections, is a spiritual communion, in which minds alone seem to mingle, and, unembarrassed by the bodily presence, converse with a freedom, a fervour, and an eloquence, rarely excited, and perhaps never more felicitously indulged, impersonal intercourse.—Hence the chief charm of a letter, if the term may be so applied, is its *individuality*.” (ix)

The elevation of the “spiritual communion” between minds unburdened by the flesh connects to the “individuality” or character revealed through the letter. *Appleton’s* manual further claims that “[t]he beauty then and excellence of letters consists in their being really mirrors of the writers’ minds, showing them more as they are than they can be seen through any other medium accessible to those who are not of their kindred or near connexions” (xviii). In this assertion, *Appleton’s* presents letters as a medium of revelation, a technology of mirroring or revealing “the writer’s mind.” Because letters are properly understood as mediums of revelation, the writer is positioned as needing a mind, or as we’ll see character, worthy of revelation. The pressure to reveal a virtuous self in a letter is heightened by the emphasis on transparent, natural, and pure style.

Transparency is the quality most sought after in these claims; transparency is related to naturalness, “pure style,” and innocence:

When, therefore, without either restraint or compulsion, we communicate with friends whom we love as ourselves, we relapse imperceptibly into unsophisticated childhood, every thing is done with the ease, simplicity, and freedom that become the occasion. Why are the letters of women, for the most part, more frank and agreeable than those of men? Because they present the first fruits of their

thoughts in the first forms of language that occur in the conception of them.  
(*Appleton's* xvi-xvii)

The best kinds of letters, according to *Appleton's*, are free from artifice, reflecting the “ease, simplicity, and freedom” of childhood and the child-like uncritical spontaneity of the women writer. Letters which are “frank and agreeable” presumably reflect a writer with nothing to hide, with no need to disguise the character he will reveal on the page.

Indeed, *Appleton's* informs its readers that women are “more delightful correspondents than most of those who call themselves the lords of creation” because they are “far more ingenuous” than men (xvii).<sup>51</sup> And adult male writers are recommended to “condescend to become women and children in letter writing; that is, [to] give expression to their feelings with the innocent hilarity of the one and the full flow of soul and affection of the other” (xvii). These recommendations for adult male writers to become child-like and woman-like in their letter-writing reveal considerable anxiety about the potential for disguising character on the page. Women and children are positioned as too simple or innocent for such disguises and, thus, suitable models for letter-writing.

Yet, while transparency is recommended, many manuals also insist that there is an art to ease, simplicity and freedom (at least for men). Turner, for instance, reprimands the “idle, thoughtless, and superficial scribbler” who “fancies, or flatters himself in the opinion, that *natural* ease consists in *dashing* down upon paper all his insipid trifles, his silly conceits, his tiresome repetitions” (19). According to Turner “natural ease and elegance” can only be acquired through attention to proper word choice and “proper arrangement of ideas” (19). In fact, the epistolary student is encouraged to embrace “frequent practice and a little instruction [which] will make him master of that *seeming* ease and simplicity” (20) (italics mine). The ease

and simplicity recommended to letter writers, then, is a studied naturalness. Naturalness does not come naturally to the writer, according to these manuals. While women and children might be recommended as models of naturalness, the manuals insist that, at least for men, there is an art to this naturalness. Artless simplicity and naturalness can lead to epistolary excess.

Because of the complexity of mastering learned naturalness, letter-writing manuals often represent a teacher as an integral figure in letter-writing instruction. The teacher is presented in several manuals as central to the student's literacy education; this central role is perhaps most underscored in the discussion of revision which Turner's 1835 *Parlour Letter-Writer* reprints from Hardie. In this discussion, the role of the teacher is described using a metaphor of the gardener:

A teacher should act with the same delicacy [as a gardener], and should know that remedies, harsh in their nature, require to be mitigated by something gentle. Some parts of his pupil's composition he may praise; for others he may make a little allowance: this he may alter, giving a reason why he does so, and that he may embellish, by introducing something of his own. It will be also sometimes of service to dictate the chief parts of a subject, which the pupil may copy and enlarge upon, and this be deceived into the flattering and encouraging idea, that it is a work of his own production. But should his style happen to be so faulty as not to admit of correction, in this case it was customary with me to have recourse to an expedient, which I always found successful. I went over the same subject again, and having explained it in all its parts, advised him to work it up anew, for that he was capable of doing it still better" (23)



Form, style, and subject are interwoven in this depiction of literacy instruction. The teacher is actively teaching the “subject” by also monitoring the approach to the subject. Thus, when style is found wanting, the teacher finds it necessary to explain “the same subject again” before the student rewrites. The teacher in this account of pedagogy is actively fashioning the student into a letter writer by, if necessary, asking the student to incorporate a correct work, which the teacher dictates, into the student’s original production. The teacher represented here is judicious, abstaining from overwhelming the student with criticism.

Transcribing model letters and developing original letters are highly interwoven processes. The *New Universal Letter-Writer* also claims that “the youth of both sexes” “would find great advantage arising from occasionally exercising themselves in transcribing or composing letters upon familiar subjects, and addressing them to their young friends” (10). In this manual, the student letter-writer might be as likely to send a transcribed letter to a friend as to send an original composition.

Because many of the manuals I discuss here declare their hostility to instruction by precept, there is a marked focus on specific recommended practices. Peyre-Ferry offers one of the most colorful pieces of advice: “Julius Caesar dictated several letters at once: do not imitate the Dictator of Rome: compose but one letter at a time” (13). In particular, assigning writing in context is a frequently recommended practice. Like Hardie above, many manuals recommend that students write to friends and relatives as a way to become artful letter writers. The *Classical English Letter-Writer*, for instance, includes this advice:

To facilitate [in] children and young persons the acquisition of the epistolary art, they should frequently be exercised in writing letters to their absent friends or relatives; on such occasions as naturally occur in domestic life, or on subjects

chosen by themselves, and adapted to their taste and acquirements. Every error which they commit in orthography or in punctuation, in language or in sentiment, should be pointed out and fully explained to them, either by their instructor, or some other friend, previously to the letters being sent; or, afterwards, by the persons to whom they are addressed. But no fault should be corrected by a teacher or friend, or on his suggestion; and the letters should always be sent exactly in the state in which they come from the pupils' own hands. (vii-viii)

By allowing students what the manual describes as the “privilege” of writing to the people in their lives about the events of their lives, the manual suggests that students will be highly motivated to improve their compositions. Although the students in this manual are choosing their own subjects, errors in “language” or “sentiment” are subject to critique by an instructor or “some other friend.” Because “sentiments” are tied to “truth and virtue,” this indicates that “error” is a term that may encompass moral missteps. Intriguingly, the actual letters are not revised to reflect these corrections; even when an error has been “pointed out and fully explained” the letter is sent as it is originally, heightening the stakes in the original composing. Exceptions are recommended in cases of importance or in case the student “very urgently” desires to make the corrections. Correction here is not revision since the particular piece of writing is not re-cast and worked on; revision as a process of re-casting ideas and editing sentences, if it can be said to exist here, is built into a longitudinal process of composing letters presumably progressively more and more error-free.

Other manuals, like *The Fashionable American Letter Writer*, seemingly dispense with the figure of the teacher and recommend literacy practices which will allow the writer to be her/his own reviser:

If the habit of composition be useful, the laborous work of correcting is no less so; it is absolutely necessary to our reaping any benefit from the habit of composing. What we have written, should be laid aside till the ardour of composition be past, till our fondness for the expressions which we have used be worn off, and the expressions themselves forgotten. By reviewing our work with a cool and critical eye, as if it were the performance of another, we shall discern many imperfections, which at first escaped our observation. It is then the season for pruning redundancies; for examining the arrangement of sentences; and for bringing style into a regular, correct, and supported form. To this labour of correction all those must submit, who would communicate their thoughts to others with proper advantage; and some practice in it will soon sharpen the eye to the most necessary objects of attentions, and render the task much more easy and practicable than might at first be imagined. (xxii-xxiii)

In these direct instructions for literacy practice, the manual itself fills the role of the teacher. Revision in this version is a process of returning to a composition with “a cool and critical eye” and reading the text as though it were composed by another – revision then is a process of reading. Because the writing process is so highly intertwined with reading practices in these directions, the manual, as a collection of model readings, is an educational apparatus for training the eye and mind to be a reader of one’s own writing. It is also an activity which with practice becomes more efficient. Revision in this case is focused on stylistics while “sentiments” are not explicitly mentioned as objects under correction.

Frequent composition, then, is a critical process to improving as a writer --- frequency or “habit” is indeed frequently recommended in many manuals. Peyre-Ferry writes that “I am

convinced by long experience, that frequent composition is the most effectual mode of acquiring a competent knowledge of any language” (vii). One of the habits often recommended as crucial to successful letter-writing is the pre-writing process; writers are told, for example, to “weigh well in your mind the design and purport of it; and consider, very attentively, what sentiments are most proper for you to express, and your correspondents to read” (ix).

This attention to what is “proper” for the reader of a letter is echoed in other manuals which also recommend thinking about who the reader is and what they should read. Peyre-Ferry writes, “Write all your letters in a simple style; especially those which are addressed to the unlearned, and to men of sense” (14). “Simple style” here is not just preferable because it has the broadest transparency, but because it is the style of “sense.” This claim that the best way to write with the reader in mind is to write in a simple style appears in many manuals. Turner emphasizes the importance of broad appeal: “The great beauty of a pure style is its being plain and intelligible to every body. It is like a smooth, limpid stream, on which the eye rests with pleasure, as it can see every thing distinctly to the bottom” (27). Turner’s “pure style” is the mode through which the transparent, virtuous character of the composer is revealed.

## 4.2 MODEL LITERACY LESSONS

Hardie’s *Epistolary Guide* offers a particularly interesting and extensive treatment of the connection between literacy activities and moral formation. The models in this manual do appear to be original productions, since the test letters I tracked through many of the other manuals which claimed to be original were notably absent. The first half of the manual is dominated by the correspondence between characters belonging to the Lambert family,

particularly between the children who are away at school and their friends and relatives. Much of the correspondence that does not involve the Lamberts issues from characters who were tangentially mentioned in Lambert family letters, thus a web of correspondence flairs out from the schools the Lambert children attend.

These model letters, then, sketch an intriguing epistolary world in which different characters represent common occurrences in their various correspondences. A fire at the boarding school that Eliza Lambert attends provides one such occasion. One model letter depicts Eliza writing to tell her mother about the fire, but a more interesting letter is from another girl, Mary Glover, who is severely burned in the fire. In a letter to her aunt, Mary reports that when her mother arrives at the seminary after the fire she finds her

very comfortably employed in reading that truly valuable work, entitled, “The Cabinet of Poetry,” of which you were pleased to make me a present, on last New Year’s Day; and here I cannot help recalling to my remembrance one of your expressions, which was, that you “wished no thanks for any book, which you might think proper to give me, provided I read it through.” You have, however, my best thanks and also my solemn assurance, that I have most carefully perused every page of the different volumes you have been pleased to give me, except “The Elegant Extracts in Poetry,” of which I have as yet been able to peruse no more than about one half. But, indeed, such is the opinion, which I entertain of the excellence of your choice, that I not only delight in reading, but in endeavouring to digest, as speedily as possible, the substance of every book, which you have had the goodness to let me have. I may also add, that the

intelligent Mrs. Jenkins so highly approves of your taste, that she always purchases copies of such books as you have been pleased to select for me. (61)

While the literature Mary refers to in this letter is not sacred or religiously-affiliated, she does understand the books given to her by her aunt to be wholesome food to be “digested.” Mary understands herself to be responsible for thoroughly ingesting the “substance” of these books of poetry. The dutiful reader Mary depicts herself to be in this letter is similar to the representations of the dutiful evangelical literacy students depicted in the novels and autobiographies I discuss in chapter three. Like the students in those texts, Mary is guided by an adult toward appropriate reading material. Furthermore, the literacy student here also functions as a kind of literacy evangelist since her book collection, sponsored by her aunt, guides “the intelligent Mrs. Jenkins’s” reading as well.

Although the texts Mary mentions in her letter are not overtly religious, her mediation about her life-threatening experience functions didactically in a way very similar to depictions of death and near-death experiences in the tracts I discuss in chapter two. Mary writes,

With respect to myself, I am happy to inform you, that the effects of a religious education have been wonderfully blessed to me. The good example set by my worthy parents, and the many pious instructions which I have received from my venerable grandmother, as well as from you and others, led me, at an early age to seek, in earnest, for the salvation of my immortal soul, and, thanks be to God! I was not long left to *seek in vain*. Thus several months have now elapsed since death has ceased to have any terror over me, and I can triumphantly exclaim with the apostle “O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory? The

sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law; But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (62)

Like the children positively depicted in the tracts I discussed earlier – and unlike the girls in the last chapter who need to be tamed before they can be saved – Mary reports on having successfully sought salvation at an early age. As we have seen in all the depictions of a character finding salvation, religious instructors play a crucial role in this transformation. Mary, for instance, refers particularly to the instructions of her “venerable grandmother” and of her aunt, who is also her guide to literature. This letter also underscores a message we have seen repeatedly emphasized in the tracts: children must seek salvation at a young age because of the threat of death. One can imagine the anxiety a reader might feel when comparing herself with Mary’s apparent nonchalance about death. Mary is a model of religious virtue here and was prepared for her near-death experience since death had “ceased” to hold any “terror” for her months before she is burned in the fire, a sentiment she marks by quoting another letter – Paul’s “First Letter to the Corinthians.”<sup>52</sup>

Hardie includes another model letter which reiterates the message of this letter: that reading is a process through which students improve themselves and that literacy students owe gratitude to the figures of authority who guide the student’s reading. In a letter from George Howe, who is away at school, to his father, George writes

I thank you for the books which you have had the goodness to send me; in particular for the Universal Preceptor. I spent five or six hours in perusing it last evening, and never fell in with a work of its size, which, in my opinion, contained so much useful and interesting matter. I shall not only read it with attention; but endeavour as speedily as possible, to make myself master of the different subjects,

on which it treats. I shall, likewise, as soon as time will permit, peruse “Mrs. Chapone’s letters on the improvement of the mind,” which must be a publication of great merit, since you have been pleased to recommend it to my serious consideration. (109)

George’s gratitude is expressed rather formally – “I thank you for the books which you have had the goodness to send me” – and this formality marks the obligation George perceives in enthusiastically and studiously reading books given as gifts. Like Mary, George vows to read the gift texts “speedily,” hinting that students understand the texts to contain information they should not go long without. Unlike Mary, George does not speak of “digesting” the text; instead, he promises to “master” it, suggesting that, for Hardie, metaphors for reading practice are gender-specific. Nonetheless, George’s father has also recommended that the boy read a collection of letters by a woman to “improve” his mind, possibly reflecting the obeisance paid to women as letter writers in manuals. While George focuses on the usefulness of the texts his father has recommended in this letter, he shifts the object of his reading a bit in a letter to a friend. In this letter he writes that he “devotes two and three hours to reading such books as seem best calculated to amuse and instruct me” (106). That the schoolboy values amusement in a letter to a peer reflects Hardie’s deft touch in developing round characters in these model letters. Of course, duty – in the desire to read “useful” texts -- is not absent from the boy’s description of reading even to his friend and one suspects that as a diligent student reader, George finds amusing that which is also useful.

Hardie indicates in any series of letters that the usefulness of reading is tied to its potential to affect transformations on the reader. In this series Joseph Belamy, who has become an idle waster at school and a sorrow to his parents, is transformed by reading a letter his former



schoolmate, William Spencer, sends to him in which he shows him the error of his ways. Joseph describes this transformation in a letter back to his friend:

From our long intimacy, you well knew that I had been, and were likewise perfectly acquainted with the causes, which had brought me to the degraded state in which I then was. You dived into the inmost recesses of my heart, was completely master of the nature and extent of my disease, and had the wisdom to devise what, by God's blessing, has proved an effectual remedy. I read the whole of your letter with peculiar interest, because I felt, that every sentiment, which you expressed was not only true; but immediately applicable to myself. I perceived that of all diseases, which infest the human mind, idleness, particularly when rendered natural by long habit, is one of the most difficult to eradicate. (46)

This letter stands as a testament to the kind of letter-writing recommended in so many of the manuals. William wrote an "intimate" letter which allowed him to "dive into the inmost recesses of" Joseph's heart. Intimacy and "sentiment," products of the writer's naturalness and transparency as an interlocutor, are tools for affecting the reader. The affective bond William creates through his letter is also reflected in the wisdom which guides the strategies he uses to transform his friend. Joseph confesses, "I had barely finished the perusal of your letter to me, when I had almost determined upon adopting that mode of conduct, which you had so judiciously recommended" (47). The "almost" in this testimony just heightens William's wise choice to include a third-party letter which rues Joseph's wasted life, a strategy which immediately cements Joseph's resolve to change.

Joseph describes his process of making amends in the letter to William, detailing the tearful apology he makes to Mr. Simpson, his teacher. He reports the effects of this apology:

At the end of three days, Mr. Simpson, publically announced to the students the declaration, which I had made to him in private of my determination to act very differently from what I had done heretofore, and told them that he had no reason to doubt my sincerity. He, therefore, recommended me to their friendly attention and begged, that they would aid me in the prosecution of my studies and in any other way, which might contribute to my prosperity and happiness. A recommendation from Mr. Simpson has, with his students the force of law. I, therefore, forthwith, found myself the object of every one's good wishes and respect. O blessed change! and to you, my dear William, to you alone, under God, am I solely indebted for it, and I fervently pray, that the giver of all good may grant you a suitable reward. (48)

Joseph laces the description of his transformation with religious undertones – he reports that he is reborn as a member of the school community *three days* after his initial confession to Mr. Simpson and he understands the service William has rendered him through the transformative letter as an act worthy of a godly reward. The simple act of reading a letter from a friend radically transforms Joseph's understanding of himself and dramatically alters his relationship with his community. In the fictional world of Mr. Simpson's school Joseph is an outcast until he embraces duty and studiousness. In the next section I will describe how this sense of duty relates to a technology of the submissive self, if not self-abnegation, and suggest the ties between the manifestation of it in these letter-writing manuals and the texts I have suggested participate in constructing evangelical literacy.

### 4.3 MODEL LESSONS: THE VIRTUE OF SUBMISSION

Generally, the model letters reflect assumptions shared by many manuals that literacy activities “inculcate” virtue. The moral lessons in these model letters center on a related set of “virtues,” obedience, submission to authority, dutifulness, and humility, which are also core virtues in the texts I discussed in the last two chapters. These four related virtues saturate didactic literature and letters in this period because they are the keystones of an evangelical Protestant construction of Christian character.<sup>53</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapters, these “virtues” have been integral to the redemption of unsaved children in the tract literature and have also authorized the female characters in “sentimental” literature to refuse the demands of immoral institutions and figures of authority. In this section I will discuss selected letters from two contemporaneous manuals, Turner’s *Parlour Letter-Writer* of 1835 and *The New Universal Letter Writer* of 1836, to demonstrate that an ideology of submission is embedded in these letters. Turner’s manual separates the model letters into five main categories: Letters on Business; Letters on Love, Courtship, and Marriage; Letters Between Friends and Relatives; Letters of Advice; and Miscellaneous Letters. The divisions between these categories are highly porous, so that the section on business letters includes “From an apprentice to his father,” a letter which could easily be positioned in the section on letters between relatives while the section on letters between friends and relatives contains a letter “From a person wishing to obtain a situation in public office.” Distinctions between public and domestic life, then, are blurred in the organization of this manual – a blurring which is furthered by the emphasis on the affective relationship between employees and employers in many of these letters.

This affective relationship is often tied to the duty of the employee to practice submission and obedience, virtues which are overtly recommended by parents in these letters. For example,

in a letter titled, “From a Poor Man to his Daughter, just Entered into Service,” the father advises his daughter, Mary, to “[e]ndeavour, by the most scrupulous attention and willing alacrity, to [meet the] wishes of your employers. This will insure you their love and protection; a constant desire to please, being always sure of success” (166). By fostering a “constant desire to please,” the maid is “insured” of earning the love and protection of her employers.

Mary is further advised to “never neglect the sacred duties of religion, a sure confidence in which can alone support you under the sorrows of this transitory life, and render you triumphant over the terrors of death” (167). Thus, Mary’s life, according to her father, is defined by the duty she owes to her employers and to religion. Submission to the first insures her protection on earth while submission to religious duty insures her against the “terrors of death.” A remarkably similar message is repeated in the very next model letter, “From a Father to his Son, An Apprentice.” This letter reads,

Be in all things submissive to your master, who, from his friendship for me, will, I am convinced, do his utmost to serve and instruct you. Remember that he now fills my place, and is equally entitled to your obedience, and also to your affection. Secondly, religion being the only foundation on which the practice of all virtue can securely rest, let me entreat that you will never, for a moment, neglect its solemn duties, a proper sense of which will elevate you above the troubles of this transitory life; and will finally conduct you to another and a better world. (167-68)

The son in this letter is urged to embrace submission and obedience to his employers and is warned against neglecting religion. The proximity between these two sets of instructions – about work and religion – suggests that there is a correlation between the virtues the son must practice

in both parts of his life. In this way, the disciplines of submission and obedience, which I have characterized in earlier chapters as “self-abnegation,” are demanded both in the privacy of the individual’s soul and in the “public” arena of his employment.

Individual virtue, then, is certainly not confined to a separate private sphere; it is the foundation for any activity in any domain. The central importance of personal virtue and submission is particularly marked in a letter titled “From an Apprentice to an Offended Master.” In this letter an apprentice seeks to make amends, writing,

Respected Sir -- After the conduct of which I have unfortunately been guilty, I scarcely dare to address you. But from the circumstances of having ever experienced the utmost kindness (which increases my guilt) I am emboldened to throw myself upon your mercy. Pray, sir, accept my repentance. Restore me again to your confidence and respect; be assured you shall never have reason to disapprove of my future conduct; and, to convince you of my sincerity, I shall not resort to the promises of what I will do, for which alone gratitude for your unmerited goodness will be my guide. I am, respected sir, in anxious expectation of your reply. Your repentant apprentice. (169)

The language the apprentice uses in this letter to make amends with his master has religious overtones – he feels “guilt,” asks for “mercy” and confesses to feeling “repentant.” The apprentice’s guilt is exacerbated by the master’s “utmost kindness” and “unmerited goodness.” The stark difference the apprentice draws between his failure and his master’s unwavering quality mirrors the relationship between the fallible and sinning person and an infallible God. Turner includes two versions of the master’s answer to the apprentice’s appeal for mercy; one

offers the apprentice a second chance while the other, establishing that the apprentice has broken his word in the past, refuses to grant clemency.

This series of letters in Turner's manual are a version of what I call the "fallen apprentice series" which appears in most of the manuals I surveyed. In the version that is typically reprinted, the apprentice confesses his repentance to his father and asks him to intercede with the master on his behalf.<sup>54</sup> The son's letter reads,

With Shame, arising from a consciousness of guilt, I have presumed to write to you at this time. I doubt not but you have heard of the irregularities in my conduct, which at last proceeded so far, as not only to induce me to desert the service of the best of masters, but to run into the commission of those vices which might have proved fatal to me. It was the allurements of vicious company that first tempted me to forsake the paths of virtue, and neglect my duty in a family where I was treated with the greatest tenderness. Fully sensible of my fault, I am willing to make every reparation in my power; but know not of any other, than by acting diametrically opposite to my former conduct. Let me beg of you, Sir, to intercede with my worthy master to take me again into his service, and my whole future life shall be one continued act of gratitude. I am, honored Sir, Your affectionate, though undutiful Son. (*New Universal*, 1836, 138)

Like the previous apprentice letter, this letter opens with the apprentice's confession of his guilt, although this letter provides more detail about the apprentice's actions. Like George the apprentice in *The Widow's Son*, a tract I discussed in the second chapter, this apprentice is led astray by "vicious" company and he partakes of potentially-fatal vices. This experience in the world of vice strengthens the apprentice's resolve to "make every reparation" in his power

(George in *The Widow's Son* becomes a tract visitor) and to make his life “one continued act of gratitude.”

The *New Universal Letter-Writer*, like many manuals, also includes a model letter series which makes explicit the connection between duty and religion. The first letter in this series is titled “From a Mother in Town, to her Daughter at a Boarding-School in the country, recommending the practice of Virtue.” Here is an excerpt from the letter:

Although we are separated in person, yet you are never absent from my thoughts; and it is my continual practice to recommend you to the care of that Being, whose eyes are on all his creatures, and to whom the secrets of all hearts are open: but I have been lately somewhat alarmed, because your two last letters do not run in that strain of unaffected piety as formerly. What, my dear, is this owing to? Is your beneficent Creator a hard master, or are you resolved to embark in the fashionable follies of a gay unthinking world . . . Religion, my dear, is a dedication of the whole man to the will of God, and virtue is the actual operation of that truth, which diffuses itself through every part of our conduct: ‘her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace’ . . . how happy shall I be to hear that my child was religious without hypocritical austerity, and even gay with innocence! Let me beg that you spend at least one hour each day in perusing your Bible, and some of our best English writers; and don’t imagine that religion is such a gloomy thing as some enthusiasts have represented: no, it indulges you in every rational amusement, so far as it is consistent with morality; -- it forbids nothing but what is hurtful. (140)

This letter embodies the qualities of the epistolary culture that I have been describing throughout this chapter. The first thing to notice about this letter is that it opens with an acknowledgement of the epistolary gap between mother and daughter; they are “separated in person” even while the daughter is always present in the mother’s thoughts. The mother seeks to close the physical distance from her daughter with her “continual practice” of “recommending” the girl to the “care” of God, a “care that she characterizes as surveillance: his “eyes are on all his creatures” and “to whom the secrets of all heart are open.” The mother indicates her worries about whether the tone in her daughter’s letters reflects a character change, whether the daughter has lost her “unaffected piety.”

God is cast as a “beneficent” master, and the daughter is reminded, like the apprentices in the letters above, of her duty to her master. The mother declares that the purpose of her letter is to “inculcate” the “useful instructions” which will benefit her in life and in eternity. The mother defines virtue as the “actual operation” of man’s submission to the will of God. The primacy of man’s submission to divine will is associated with evangelical literacy activities – reading the Bible and “our best English writers” – because these literacy activities are a means of practicing devotion and obedience. In this way, the message “inculcated” in this letter is extremely similar to the values exposed in the texts I discuss in the two previous chapters. In the case of the letter-writing manuals I discuss here, the focus is less on producing what Mary Favret may identify as a feminized intimate self (10), than removing impediments to living a virtuous life. The virtues, particularly duty, obedience, and piety, promoted in these manuals are not “feminized,” instead they are, as we have seen in earlier chapters, universal virtues celebrated in evangelical constructions of literacy.



In the daughter's answer to the mother's letter, the daughter claims both that reading is a transformative activity and that duty is the most important quality a Christian child can have. While she repeats these lessons, which we have seen frequently repeated both in model letters and in the essays and introductions included in the manuals, the daughter's letter can also be read to be disagreeing with the impious character the mother detects in the daughter's correspondence. The daughter writes,

That levity so conspicuous in my former letters, is too true to be denied, nor do I desire to draw a veil over my own folly. No, Madam, I freely confess it; but with the greatest sincerity, I must at the same time declare, that they were written in a careless manner, without considering the character of the person to whom they were addressed: I am fully sensible of my error, and, on all future occasions, shall endeavor to avoid giving the least offence. The advice you sent me in your valuable letters, wants no encomium; all that I desire is, to have it engraven on my heart. My dear Madam, I love religion, I love virtue, and I hope no consideration will ever lead me from those duties, in which alone I expect future happiness.

(141)

The daughter characterizes herself as highly affected by her mother's letter, claiming that she "can scarcely hold" her pen in answer. The daughter admits to the folly of levity in her previous correspondence, but denies that she has lost the innocent piety her mother recommends. Instead, she frames the tone which her mother reacted to as a composition failure: she failed to consider "the character of the person to whom [her letters] were addressed."

The "error" the daughter ends up confessing to is forgetting to tailor her letter to the particular reader, making this model letter doubly didactic as it reaffirms the necessity of duty

and obedience and as it illustrates the dangers of poor composition. The daughter hopes that the virtues her mother seeks to “inculcate” will be “engraved” on her heart and reaffirms her love of religion and virtue and her dedication to duty. I am intrigued by the daughter’s reframing of the folly of her initial letter and by how she juggles her duty to be submissive and obedient with her disagreement about her mother’s reading of the letter.

As I discussed in the last chapter, I found that certain writers who participated in representing evangelical literacy sought to demonstrate that piety at times burdened the conventionally-powerless character with the right and means to resist or defy figures of authority. There are two letters in the *New Universal Letter Writer* which provide interesting test cases for seeing to what extent moral authority was represented as a tool for resisting authority. The two letters I will discuss are letter in which young women seek to convince the man who has legal power over them not to compel them to marry against their wishes. The first is titled “From a Daughter to her Father, wherein she dutifully expostulated against a match he had proposed to her, with a gentleman much older than herself.” Here is part of the letter:

Though your injunctions should prove diametrically opposite to my own secret inclinations, yet I am not insensible that the duty which I owe you binds me to comply with them. Besides, I should be very ungrateful, should I presume in any point whatever, considering your numberless acts of parental indulgence towards me, to contest your will and pleasure. Though the consequences should prove ever so fatal, I am determined to be all obedience, in case what I have to offer in my own defense should have no influence over you, or be thought an insufficient plea for my aversion to a match which, unhappily for me, you seem to approve of . . . If, however, after all, you shall judge the inequality of our age an insufficient

plea in my favor, and that want of affection for a husband is but a trifle, where there is a large fortune and a coach-and-six to throw into the scale; if, in short, you shall lay your peremptory commands upon me to resign up my real happiness and peace of mind, for the vanity of living in pomp and grandeur, I am ready to submit to your superior judgment. Give me leave, however, to observe that it is impossible for me ever to love the man into whose arms I am to be thrown; and that my compliance with so detested a proposition, is nothing more than the result of the most inviolable duty to a father, who never made the least attempt before to thwart the inclination of His ever obedient daughter. (104-105)

The rhetorical strategies the “ever obedient daughter” deploys in this letter combine overt claims about submission and duty with pointed criticisms of the duty her father is burdening her with. It is the very claims about her obedience which enable the daughter to disagree with her father’s decision. By opening her letter by essentially ventriloquizing claims her father could make about the daughter’s duty and gratitude, the daughter frames the arguments she uses to contest her father’s “will and pleasure” not as contestation since she claims that contestation is impossible for her as a daughter who knows the duty she owes her father. And yet, this claim is followed by the threat that the father’s decision to marry the daughter to this older suitor could “prove ever so fatal” for the daughter.

The subtext of the letter suggests that despite the daughter’s constant protestations about her father’s “tender regard,” the daughter has regularly disciplined herself in order to remain dutiful to him. She writes, for instance, “permit me, good Sir, to speak of the sentiments of my heart without reserve, *for once*,” suggesting she has restrained the expression of sentiments in the past (*italics mine*). Following this line, the letter gets more heated as the daughter characterizes

her father as weighing the suitor's "large fortune and a coach-and-six" against the daughter's "real happiness and peace of mind." The daughter thus positions herself as morally superior, unswayed by crass material inducements to marry.

Indeed, she intimates that her father's emphasis on the material argument in favor of the suitor makes her father a kind of pimp who will "throw" his daughter into the "arms" of a man she cannot love. Unlike her father, who is willing to violate his daughter for material gain, the daughter assures him that *her* sense of duty will remain "inviolable." The weight of the daughter's sense of duty, her obedience, in the face of a fatal dictate clearly allows her to exercise rhetorical power. She re-frames the potential marriage as essentially a failure of her father, who has legal and economic power over her, to act on his duty to her.

The last letter I discuss, like this letter from the expostulating daughter, represents a girl's arguments against the man with legal power over her who wants to marry her to a man she rejects. This letter, "A Ward to her Guardian, against compulsive Marriage," is more aggressive than the daughter's letter:

I hope you will do me the justice to acknowledge, that hitherto I have in no material instance transgressed the obedience which I owe that friend whom my father, in his will, appointed as my guardian – that guardian, who now supplies the place of a father; but on the contrary, that I have been attentive to his advice, and submissive to his will; still I hope to preserve the character of an obedient ward. You have expressed a great desire, that I should give my hand to Mr. Sturdy: herein I must disobey; were it a father's self that demanded compliance, duty, if not directed by inclination, must give way to nature. I have therefore taken this liberty, with all deference, to put in a plea for your candid indulgence,

in a matter that concerns the happiness of my life, and, though a female, to reason with you a little upon it . . . Having thus far expatiated as well as my feeble abilities will permit, upon the inevitable consequences of uniting young and old, I hope my dear guardian will no longer favor the addresses of his friend, but persuade him to look out for a more suitable and worthy lady than his young foolish ward. (110-111)

The rhetorical strategy the ward deploys at the beginning of this letter is similar to that which opens the daughter's letter. The ward, like the daughter, establishes her history of obedience, claiming that in all prior instances she has been "submissive" to her guardian's will. Unlike the daughter, the ward declares her resolve to "disobey" – a right she claims any woman to have, even in relation to a father, if nature and duty collide. This is a rather startling assertion, particularly because we can assume that these model letters were written by man and because the letter's subtext suggests that Mr. Sturdy (his name is certainly propitious) is an attractive suitor, if a tad old.

The "nature" which legitimates the ward's disobedience in this letter is related to the "sentiment" the daughter identifies as the source of her protestation in the previous letter. Thus, while the ward proceeds to lay out reasonable arguments against such an asymmetrical match, she presents her arguments as legitimated by a force preliminary to reason – nature. By characterizing herself as "feeble" and "foolish," the ward seeks to couch her reasoned and vociferous arguments with "deference."

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment*, the "slave morality" which the weak and the Christian church use to restrain the strong by celebrating the virtues of self-sacrifice and compassion, is useful for thinking about the strategies the young women use in these letters to

attempt to claim power over their own lives. While I find *ressentiment* to be highly problematic in many ways, particularly because it would conflate culturally-determined hierarchies of economic and legalistic power with essentially a spiritual failing, I think it is a suggestive starting point for thinking about the ways Christian subjectivity relates to and exercises power. Both Nietzsche and Foucault associate the construction of a Christian identity with asceticism.

For Nietzsche this asceticism associates “self-denial and self-punishment” with the production of “an inner life where none existed before” (xx). Nietzsche finds repellent the very qualities that are recommended to readers in all the texts I have discussed in this study so far – duty, obedience, submission, piety – qualities which he would associate with “mistreating the self” (68). Nietzsche is useful to the extent he helps us think through how the cultivation of “unegoistic” practices become a way to harness the power of claiming “*moral* value.” The expostulating daughter in the former letter, for instance, emphasizes that she has a history of abstaining from expressing, and presumably acting, on “the sentiments of her heart” and she uses this history to legitimate her expression of those sentiments during an occasion in which she confronts her father with the reasons he favors an older, wealthy suitor. The daughter and the ward in the letters above, like the characters I discuss in the last chapter, are represented as using the power of the “unegoistic” strategically.<sup>55</sup>

I have become increasingly interested in this mode of exercising power because it reveals the fallacy of separating the “private” world of morality from the “public” worlds of economic, social, and political relationships. If a character identified simply as a “daughter” or a “ward” has a means for legitimating confrontation and disagreement with the man who has economic and political power over her, she also has, by extension, a means to legitimate participation in any realm. What I am trying to suggest is that even though the private sphere “has been

understood as the sphere of moral and religious conscience” (Benhabib 108), moral and religious conscience have always already saturated the “public sphere.”

The distinctions we draw today between public and private spheres were inoperable in an antebellum culture in which “business letters” could be easily re-classified as letters between relations and vice versa. As the emphasis on character and virtue in these letter-writing manuals demonstrate, the affective and, indeed, religious self we often consign to the private sphere was the central participant in “public sphere” events, if by public we mean to indicate economic and social spheres.<sup>56</sup> By recognizing the highly porous nature of any boundaries between private and public spheres in the first half of the nineteenth-century, we are better able to identify the significance that moral and affective authority could have for politically-disenfranchised people.

## 5.0 PUBLIC-ORIENTED WRITING PEDAGOGY: NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION AND CITIZENSHIP

“The teaching of reading and writing can never be innocent . . .”

-- Andrea Lunsford, Helene Moglen, and James Slevin, *The Right to Literacy*, 2.

The questions we ask and the metaphors and narratives we use to describe history determine what we are able to see in that history. In the previous chapters of this study, I have worked to re-see the history of nineteenth-century literacy education by asking questions about why evangelical Protestantism had such a powerful presence in narrative representations of literacy instruction in tracts, novels and letter-writing manuals. This work has allowed me to suggest that an evangelical literacy both advocated a technology of the self that promoted self-abnegation and empowered legally-marginal figures to critique political and religious institutions and to resist figures of authority.

As I turn to the present day in this chapter I return to the questions that motivated my historical work to further ask what contemporary narratives of duty and empowerment advanced about literacy students and education tell us about the culture from which these narratives emerge. In particular, I examine the metaphors and narratives composition scholars use to characterize the means by which composition courses are thought to prepare students to engage with “public” spheres. Because I am specifically interested in connections between literacy



instruction and participation in public discourses, I focus on discussions about two kinds of courses that are identified with the “public turn” in composition: public-oriented writing courses and professional writing courses.<sup>57</sup> The first section of this chapter explores the potential advantages and problems inherent in mapping the composition classroom with the language of public and private spheres. The second section explores the metaphors used to describe who students become through public-oriented professional writing pedagogy.<sup>58</sup> This pedagogy is “publically-oriented” in the sense that it seeks to enlarge the parameters of the classroom space by making interventions into public discourses through the positioning of students as writing for readers outside of the classroom.

The “public turn” has been characterized by scholars such as Susan Wells, Christian Weisser, and Paula Mathieu as writing pedagogy that attempts “to prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political and social responsibilities, and for lives as active participants in public life” (Weisser 3). Often, public-oriented writing courses tie writing assignments to “‘real world’ texts, events, or exigencies,” though reading material and though service-learning (Mathieu 1).<sup>59</sup> Because of their emphasis on contexts outside of the classroom, on service-learning, and, increasingly, on citizenship, professional writing courses are often the sites of public-oriented writing instruction. Whether “the public turn” manifests itself in public-oriented writing courses or in professional writing courses, the common goal for public-oriented writing instruction seems to be “to help students *transform* themselves into active, critical participants in democratic society” (Weisser 39). It is this emphasis on transformation which most interests me and which connects contemporary claims about the work of composition to my work on the nineteenth-century narratives that represent the

transformations of literacy students into Christians empowered to transform the people and communities around them.

## 5.1 AN IMAGINARY SPHERE: MAPPING “THE PUBLIC” IN WRITING INSTRUCTION

While recent publications of books on public writing and special issues of *Technical Communication Quarterly* suggest that the notion of a “public turn” in composition has reached the status of a commonplace, there is far less agreement about what “the public turn” means or even what composes a “public.” If we were to attempt to map the sites of the publics that are invoked by scholars in composition, we would find that the three major orientations governing the use of this concept are often contradictory. The first orientation, which is the most abstract, is best expressed by Christian Weisser:

Briefly stated, public writing consists of written discourse that attempts to engage an audience of local, regional, or national groups or individuals in order to bring about progressive societal change. Such discourse intends to be free of any coercive constraints or forms of domination, and it hopes to influence what Habermas calls “public opinion.” (90)

Weisser’s description of public writing depends on a Habermasian notion of the discursive foundation of the public sphere. By invoking the various audiences public writers may target, Weisser signals that the public sphere is constituted by multiple, geographically-defined publics. These geographic publics, for Weisser, expand from the local to the national. Although Weisser’s version of public writing is focused on producing “progressive societal change,” it is

also “free of any coercive constraints or forms of domination.” Progressive ends are, presumably, tied for Weisser to a form of persuasion, or “influence,” which is non-coercive. By identifying public spheres by geographic range, Weisser positions the student writer as attempting “to engage” already-existing publics. By qualifying social change with the adjective “progressive,” Weisser signals that public writing pedagogy is marked by a particular set of values. This implies that students entering these courses are already assumed to share their teachers’ progressive values or will be transformed by the course into progressives.

The second significant orientation governing the use of the term is tied to particular sites of social activism. Paula Mathieu, for instance, recasts the “public turn” in composition as “a turn to the streets” (xiv).<sup>60</sup> For Mathieu, the “public turn” is manifested in courses on public writing or in courses that include service learning or “street” content such as “street papers,” newspapers written by homeless people. As part of the public turn, teachers connect “the writing that students and they themselves do with ‘real world’ texts, events, or exigencies” (1). Mathieu argues that teachers who “invite students to engage in public writing” have an advantage over other teachers because public writing “gives students more intrinsic motivations for their writing by seeing broader purposes or audiences for their work” (26).

This version of public writing emphasizes direct activism, unlike Weisser’s version in which students seek to “influence” audiences through rhetoric. This second version of public writing often turns to service learning as a way of fostering active citizenship. This move to public service in public writing pedagogy is also a form of activism by teachers who want “to promote an active vision of citizenship, to serve the community” (Clark 309). The “streets” in this type of activist pedagogy substitute for the ancient agora. By interacting within this contemporary agora, the writing student receives an education in “citizenship” (320). Certain

types of citizenship are invited in response to a “call to the streets,” which is motivated by the teacher’s “desire for writing to enter civic debates; for street life to enter classrooms through a focus on local, social issues; for students to hit the streets by performing service, and for teachers and scholars to conduct activist or community-grounded research” (Mathieu 1-2). This form of public writing pedagogy relies on the teachers’ desire to participate in “civic debates” and the teacher’s commitment to performing “activist” research. In this way, this pedagogy is as much or more about who the teacher is than who the students are.

The third “public” orientation in writing pedagogy ties the “public” to the corporate world or the world of work more generally. The “public” is often replaced with the language of “the real world” in these discussions, and there is a marked emphasis on introducing writing students to professional contexts and discourses while they are still at university. This version of public writing, like Mathieu’s “street” pedagogy, is often characterized as increasing student commitment to course work since students more directly see how their writing gains importance in “real,” non-school contexts. This third version of public writing is significantly different from the previous two versions since the writing is tied less to progressive social change than to recognizing the ways professional writing affects the culture beyond the particular location where the writing is produced. Katherine Durack writes, for instance, that

[t]echnical writing exists within government and industry, as well as in the intersection between private and public spheres. Technical writing exists to accomplish something: as Cooper points out, it is a form of social action . . . Although many forms of technical writing exist and are employed strictly within and among organizations, there are also significant instances of its use within and

origination from individual households in their interactions with government and industry. (41)

In this description, professional writing, like other versions of public-oriented writing pedagogy, is a form of “social action.” Because of this, scholars of public-oriented writing instruction have attempted to map the social contexts that students are being prepared to write into. In these schema, social contexts often become plotted against a backdrop of public and private spheres in which, as in the example above, “government and industry” are located in the public sphere and the “individual household” is located in the private sphere. But this binary relationship between the public and private introduces difficulties when scholars attempt to describe the location of the writing classroom in public-oriented writing instruction. One of the qualities shared by the three versions of public-oriented writing pedagogy is an ambivalence about the place of the writing classroom. Public-oriented writing pedagogy focuses on the world outside of the classroom; nonetheless, the classroom provides the occasion for students to engage with local, regional, national publics; the “street”; or the workplace. In pedagogies which invoke the language of publics, how should we understand the position of the writing classroom?

Susan Wells’ influential 1996 article, “Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?” outlined the terms within which composition and rhetoric scholars have framed their discussions about public and public writing. Wells claims that composition teachers are beset with a “problem of locating the public,” a predicament, according to Wells, that results in desultory assignments in which students write letters to editors of local newspapers and congressmen (326). In Wells’ mapping of public spaces, she, following Edward Schiappa’s lead, critiques a literal and romanticized notion of “the agora or the Enlightenment coffee house,” warning against the fantasy of “a pre-existing forum where citizens make decisions face to face”

(326). The problem as she sees it is that this public space “is so intensely imagined that we think it must be real – just a little inaccessible, like live theater or downtown department stores” (326). For Wells, writing instructors too often make the mistake of either romanticizing the public as a site of direct civic engagement or of imposing an impoverished version of the public sphere on their students in which civic engagement is limited to responding to news stories or writing appeals to politicians.

Wells seeks to ward off the post-lapsarian ennui that the fantasy of “the agora or Enlightenment coffee house” can produce, reiterating the importance of disarticulating the concept of a public from location: “for Habermas, the public is not a pre-existing site, a place to be entered by good citizens or seized by insurgents. Public discourse is not a kind of writing, or an ensemble of genres (letters to the editor, campaign leaflets, letter to congress). Public discourse is a complex array of discursive practices” (328). Wells usefully shifts public-oriented writing from site-specific locations, such as an agora or coffee house, to “a complex array of discursive practices.” And, yet, Wells cannot escape the gravitational pull that metaphors of location exercise on descriptions of the public. A post-lapsarian echo persists through Wells’ description of “our public sphere” as “attenuated, fragmented, and colonized” (328). She expresses what she sees as a disorientation shared by composition scholars and teachers that “our encounters with even a local civic space – the place where we decide a strike vote, hire a new minister, form a block watch – are discontinuous and associated with crises” (326). Wells then renames these “local civic spaces,” calling them “scraps of discursive space” (326). By identifying these “scraps of discursive space” as the *places* where civic activism occurs, Wells seem to tie public discourse to particular locations. Tying publics to specific locations works

against the flexibility suggested by Wells's attempt to move away from romanticized sites such as the agora by emphasizing discursive circulation as the foundation of publicity.

In the end, the persistence of the location metaphor prompts Wells to recommend public writing curricula extending physically outside the classroom. She argues that “the writing classroom has no public exigency: the writing classroom does important cultural work for a million and a half students it serves each year, but it does not carry out that work through the texts it produces” (338). By this, Wells means that students' public writing “means writing for no audience at all,” since, she argues, “there is no place within the culture where student writing on gun control is held to be of general interest, no matter how persuasive the general interest, or how intimate their acquaintance with guns” (328). Here again we see Wells constrained by the emphasis on location – the desire for “*a place*” where “student writing on gun control is held to be of general interest.” If we seek “a place” where student writing should be of interest, it is the classroom. But, for Wells the writing classroom has “no public exigency” and, therefore, the writing students produce for this classroom is cut off, because of its very reason for being, from participating in the public sphere.

This situation – the essential alienation of student writing from the public sphere – produces two kinds of flawed writing assignments according to composition scholars advocating public-oriented writing pedagogy. The first type of flawed assignment is described by Christian Weisser as writing with nothing at stake. While Wells envisions students writing essays about controversial subjects that no one wants to read, Weisser suggests that teachers assign meaningless topics (“what you did last summer”) about which no one wants to read. Weisser claims that because public writing “allows students to produce meaningful discourse that has the potential to change their lives and the lives of others,” students will “see public writing as more

‘real’ than, for example, an essay about what they did last summer or an analysis of a particular piece of literature” (91-92). Arguments like these seek to promote public writing pedagogy by caricaturing the alternatives as the worst kind of demeaning busywork.

The second type of flawed assignment is described above by Wells as assignments which ask students to engage with important topics under false pretenses since, presumably, no one but the student and her teacher are interested in what the student has to bring to this topic. Gerald Graff argues that “[t]he standard theme assignment that asks students to take a stand on public issues like homelessness, poverty, or abortion rests on the increasingly hollow pretense that what we think and say about such issues can actually make a difference” (57). Gary Olson treads similar ground when he writes, for instance, “Too often, composition pedagogies have been thoroughly arhetorical, directing students to write to no one for no apparent purpose (‘Write a three-page paper on abortion’)” (ix). Public-oriented writing pedagogy is meant to be the antidote to these arhetorical, hollow student papers. Olson welcomes “the move toward public writing,” arguing that it is “an effort to reinstate rhetoric as the heart of effective composition pedagogy” (ix). According to Olson, this rhetorically-grounded composition pedagogy, by its very nature, “is an implicit critique of those pedagogies that center on teaching students to ‘express’ their inner feelings and not to ‘worry’ about audience, to write principally ‘for one’s self’” (ix). Olson’s conflation of an unmoored assignment on abortion with his unfriendly parody of expressivism aligns both readerless-writing and writing for the self. Olson’s distinction between public writing and “private” writing in which students “‘express’ their inner feelings” relies on a binary opposition between the public and the private.

In this way, representations of the relationship of the writing classroom to the world outside of the classroom are often overlaid with a contemporary version of the nineteenth-



century separate spheres binary.<sup>61</sup> In these representations, the classroom and the academy are extensions of the domestic space, as in Stephen Bernhardt's contention that

Academics tend to fix inwardly on their classrooms, programs, and texts. Teaching has long been recognized as an isolating profession, conducted with younger people behind the closed classroom door . . . Technical communication, then, finds itself embedded within a larger culture of English and Humanities Studies that either actively or passively resists thinking about work. Because of a long tradition of separate and isolated practice, schools can ignore work and still do their business. (82).

Bernhardt's language casts that classroom as an enclosed, airless space "separate and isolated" from "work." His characterization of academics' "inward" fixation and "passivity" deploys the language often used to describe the nineteenth-century domestic sphere. "Work" for Bernhardt is apparently located necessarily in locations outside of the school; just as in over-determined claims about separate spheres ideology, the domestic space is defined as a site separate from the sphere of economic and labor relations (even though these relations saturate the domestic space).

Composition scholars have been subject to the constraints imposed by the metaphors commonly used to discuss public writing pedagogy and the role of the student in both public and professional writing classes. Location metaphors reflect difficulties by reinscribing a binary relationship between the private and the public. Even when Wells, for instance, tries to find a space between the binary poles with her unappetizing metaphor for the writing classroom as a prison visiting room, she ends up reaffirming the separation between public and private spheres:

The image of the visiting room suggests that our work establishes a point of exchange between the private, the domain of production, and some

approximations of the public sphere. It is not directed at the political opinions of students, however progressive or retrograde, but toward the production and reading of texts that move between the public (the political, the abstract, the discussable) and the private. (335)

There are two levels to Wells's metaphor of the writing classroom as prison visiting room. On one level, the classroom is the site of exchange between the private and public spheres. On another level, the writing classroom occasions pieces of writing in which the writer shuttles between the public, which Wells characterizes as "the political, the abstract, and the discussable," and the private, which I take to be related to experience.

I suspect that the concept of the public can not adequately describe the ways writing participates in what may be tentatively described as civic discourses. The binary relationship between the public and private spheres is so entrenched that it is difficult to deploy the concept of the public without triggering a contrasting version of the private, as we see in Wells, for example. This creates a situation in which the writing classroom, distinct from the public sphere, risks becoming confined to the private sphere.

The use of binaries may make for easy shortcuts to larger arguments, but these shortcuts obscure the nuances and complexities of public sphere theory that are most suggestive for writing pedagogy. For Jurgen Habermas, the public and the private are categories that spill into each other since the bourgeois public sphere was constituted by "private people who related to each other," forming a public (28). The public sphere thus depends on the "privateness" of the individual, which Habermas defines as "a saturated and free interiority" (28). Habermas's public sphere is built on "the subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family" which, he argues, "created, so to speak, its own public" (29).

Habermas focuses on the eighteenth-century formation and expression of this subjectivity through literature and letters. Thus, “private” literacy activities are central to his conceptualization of the public sphere. The private people who form the public are products of what Foucault would recognize as “a technology of the self” since they are engaged with literacy activities that shape subjectivity. In Habermas’s example, eighteenth-century letter writing prepared these private people for the public. Habermas claims both that “through letter writing the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity” (48) and that “subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented toward an audience” (49).

In the act of letter writing, the writer “unfolds” himself to himself and his reader(s). Habermas argues here that a certain kind of literacy practice – writing that enacts self-revelation and is also outwardly-directed – is foundational for the formation of a public sphere constituted by the production and circulation of discourse. A Habermasian reading might thus support Susan Wells’ contention that “[p]ersonal essays are not intrinsically ‘private’; technical discourse is not necessarily ‘public.’ Rather, publicity is constructed as a relation of readers to writers, including notions of rationality and accountability that are continually open to contest” (335). By emphasizing the role of “relations of readers to writers” in the construction of publicity – or public-ness – Wells shifts away from location-based metaphors for the public sphere to a more productive focus on relationships. Her work oscillates between location based metaphors and a more complex formulation of public-ness as a relation inherent in the reader/writer binary -- relation that reflects the hybrid space of the Habermasian construction. We should read this oscillation as symptomatic of the difficulty in escaping the public/private binary when working with written texts produced to meet a number of needs: the expression of ideas for an often

indeterminate audience, the expression of ideas for a self, and the work of bringing both of these formulations into a more activist relation in public-oriented writing courses.

Indeed, one of the risks presented by using the binary of public and private is that all too often the distinction between that which is labeled public and discussable and that which is deemed private and non-discussable is determined by groups or individuals who have a vested interest in confining certain topics to a private sphere (Fraser 14). In particular, grafting the public/private binary onto the relationship between the writing classroom and the world beyond the classroom also raises questions about how this binary is gendered. John Trimbur, for instance, notes that “counterposing the ‘real world’ to the classroom draws upon a gendered separation of spheres” (195).<sup>62</sup>By mapping the public-private binary onto arguments about the efficacy of the composition classroom, some proponents of “public” or “street” writing pedagogy are vulnerable to the critique advanced by literary critics You-Me Park and Gayle Wald:

A strict separate spheres analytical framework, with its fetishistic and reductionistic separation of *the* public and *the* private, obscures crucial questions about mobility and agency across socially constructed lines of difference. The terms *public* and *private* have borne, and continue to bear, the inscription of ongoing struggles around questions of access to social power, where power is a function of one’s location within a social geography of separate spheres. (268)

Park and Wald suggest that the language of “public” and “private” might be inadequate to the task of describing the “mobility and agency across socially constructed lines of difference.” The public-private binary carries with it a particular “social geography” which all too often is gendered in discussions about the kind of writing students are asked to produce. Particularly in representations that emerge from technical and professional writing, technical discourse is

celebrated as hard, gritty, and masculine against the soft, unserious, and feminine writing of personal essays. Thus, as Katherine Durack argues, “to define technical writing by placing it strictly within the workplace denies the historical contributions of women, but in doing so it also denies a larger past – and future—where the household is a primary location for the economically productive activities of women and men” (41).

The anxiety about the so-called “feminization” of composition and teaching, more generally, suggests that this updated separate spheres binary catalyzes institutional and remunerative distinctions between academics who are identified primarily as classroom teachers as distinct from those who have “public” visibility as scholars and intellectuals.<sup>63</sup> The work of feminist literary critics may be productively brought to bear on modern applications of a private/public binary in writing pedagogy. Arguments that Nina Baym has mounted against literacy critics’ use of this binary to describe nineteenth-century gender politics are applicable to constructions of the field of composition produced by people in the field. Just as Baym argues that “the domestic sphere” was “a work site fully participant in public life” (12), since the domestic or private sphere was the “place where citizens and citizenship were produced” (6), so too can we argue that the writing classroom is always already “fully participant in public life” since schools are sites where citizens come together to learn.

As I discuss in chapter one, I think the concept of the “civic sphere” and civic discourse better describe the ways the classroom can be read as a civic space if one conceptualizes the civic as

A space between the family and the state where people associate across ties of kinship, aside from the market, and independent of the state. It includes both relatively formal organizations and the informal array of friendship and networks

of social life outside the family. It is the arena of community meetings and street corner activity, clubs and churches, *sabhas* and *samajs*, professional associations and unions, social movement and community action groups. (Elliott 8)

The advantages to thinking of the classroom and writing activities which occur in the classroom as part of a civic sphere allows the classroom and these writing activities to exist in the spaces “between” the family and the state, between “private” writing and “public writing.” Like other locations Carolyn Elliott names as part of a civic sphere, the writing classroom is neither fully public nor fully private. The writing classroom is not public, for instance, to the extent that admission to the classroom is restricted to students. Likewise, it is not “private” to the extent that the classroom is a site where individuals often discuss and debate topics of common concern and negotiate questions of value.

## **5.2 CITIZEN, SLAVE, OR TECHNOCRAT? METAPHORS FOR STUDENT TRANSFORMATION IN PUBLIC-ORIENTED TECHNICAL AND PROFESSIONAL WRITING**

The “public turn” in composition is often justified with claims about the transformative potential of writing pedagogies. In these terms public-oriented writing pedagogy is offered as an antidote to globalization, corporatism, and what Gerald Graff calls the displacement of the citizen by the consumer (57). In this section I examine the ways that students are characterized in discussions about public-oriented professional writing instruction.<sup>64</sup> These discussions essentially invoke scenes of literacy instruction by casting students in particular roles determined by public-oriented writing instruction.

The public turn in professional writing has been fueled by claims that the efficacy of professional writing places a particular burden on the professional writer. Public writing pedagogies share a starting assumption that public writing students can potentially transform the world outside of the classroom; this assumption creates an urgency about transforming public-writing students themselves into ethical users of this transformative potential. Thus, the metaphors used to describe who students become through public-oriented writing pedagogy function in many ways as narratives about the transformative potential of this pedagogy. The public-oriented writing pedagogies which focus on progressive activism often cast this transformative potential as productive while the pedagogies which equate public orientation with professional writing often display deep anxieties about the transformative potential of these pedagogies.

This point has been most vividly made by Steven Katz in his essay, “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust,” where he argues that technocratic discourse made possible the Nazis’ extermination program. Katz analyzes a 1942 Nazi memo in which a bureaucrat provides recommendations about how to make the vans used to gas people more efficient. In his analysis, Katz contends that “[b]y any formal criteria in [contemporary] technical communication, [the Nazi memo] is an almost perfect document” (184). The central quality shared by contemporary technical writing pedagogy and this memo, according to Katz, is the privileging of rhetorical efficacy above all else (193). As an antidote to the privileging of rhetorical efficacy, many articles and books in professional and technical writing accept the premise that writing instructors have to prepare their students to “act, both in their professional capacities as communicators and as citizens” (Markel 5). This assumption leads to claims that professional and technical writing teachers “have to face the fact that in

teaching discourse we are unavoidably engaged in the production of professional and cultural power” (Rude 354).

The “public turn” in composition, and particularly in professional writing, grows out of longstanding anxieties about composition teachers’ complicity in hegemonic systems of oppression founded on a belief that the classroom transforms students into particular kinds of people. As professional writing curricula have grown, they have carried the potential of fulfilling the darkest fantasies of capitulation to capitalist systems of oppression that historians of composition have long warned about (*see* Ohmann). Far from embracing an illusion of innocence about teaching, critical pedagogues in professional writing ask if it is possible to teach within this curriculum without abetting the interests of corporations at a time when good corporate citizenship is waning.

Professional writing curricula seemed to threaten a belletristic educational tradition with its emphasis on what Suzanne De Castell and Allan Luke call a “technocratic education,” characterized by its

neutralization of personal, social and political sanctions, indeed its independence from any substantive context and, therefore, content – [which] produces students who follow instructions simply because they are there . . . In disregarding the social and ethical dimensions of communicative competence, technocratic education nurtures the literal, the superficial, and the uncommitted, but ‘functionally’ literate. (De Castell and Luke 173)

The technocratic education described here depends on a purely functionalist literacy pedagogy. In functionalist literacy pedagogy students are encouraged to be task-oriented and to ignore, as extraneous, “the social and ethical dimensions” of communication. The student is transformed



into a mere instruction-follower. The dangers of functionalist literacy are most vividly characterized by Charles Knoblauch who writes that

functionalism serves the world as it is, inviting outsiders to enter that world on the terms of its insiders . . . Soldiers will know how to repair an MX missile by reading the field manual but will not question the use of such weapons because of their reading of antimilitarist philosophers; clerks will be able to fill out and file their order forms but will not therefore be qualified for positions in higher management. (76)

The student shaped by functionalist literacy here, the soldier and the clerk, are figured as passive recipients, unable to question or even professionally advance in a world with a hierarchical order as starkly maintained as that in Huxley's *Brave New World*. Histories which connect professional and technical writing to functionalism seek to heighten the anxieties produced by these courses.

Dystopic narratives about professional writing pedagogy worry about the cultural work of this pedagogy. This anxiety is heightened by professional writing's roots in engineering programs. As a point of origin, engineering programs are far removed, in these dystopic narratives, from the humanist influence of the belle lettre tradition or the study of rhetoric.<sup>65</sup> To the extent that engineering programs shaped the formation of professional writing, professional writing scholar Dale Sullivan worries that professional writing teachers "often find [them]selves representing the military-industrial complex instead of the humanistic tradition" (Sullivan 375).<sup>66</sup> Sullivan argues that

teaching standardized formats and forms means teaching the technological mindset, and, thus, acculturating students into the military-industrial complex.

This conclusion further suggests that we implicitly accept present restrictions on public discourse about technology and fail to give students power to engage in social action. (377)

In Sullivan's characterization professional writing courses are the ultimate service courses, explicitly grooming workers for the military-industrial complex. Writing classrooms transform students by "acculturating" them into the "military-industrial complex." The values that shape these technocratic students impose restrictions on the students' public discourse and on their potential for social activism. When Sullivan writes that professional writing teachers "implicitly accept present restrictions on public discourse about technology," he voices a concern that has significantly shaped efforts to orient professional writing and the broader composition curriculum toward public or "social" activism.

Critiques of technical and professional writing pedagogy often express extreme anxiety about who students become through these classes. For some, like Dale Sullivan, "teachers of writing *indoctrinate* students, turning them into *the sorts of people* who fill the slots available in our technological society" (375, emphasis added). These "sorts of people" Sullivan worries about – the slot-fillers, the Organization Men and Women – are, for Sullivan, another category of slaves. Sullivan argues that technocratic writing skills have been divorced from political discourse, reflecting a division of labor like that of ancient Greece, in which slaves did "most of the writing . . . in the 'world of work'" while citizens participated in political discourse (380). Stripped of agency, the students who are the products of technocratic writing education are mere instruments – the word processors – of governing elites.<sup>67</sup>

Less extreme versions of this narrative figure what Patricia Bizzell calls "nonacademic writing" pedagogy as potentially serving a hegemonic function. Bizzell argues that

‘our dilemma is that we want to empower students to succeed in the dominant culture so that they can transform it from within; but we fear that if they do succeed, their thinking will be changed in such a way that they will no longer want to transform it . . . The theoretical question suggested by this conflict – and it is especially urgent for researchers and teachers of professional and non-academic writing – is the relation of discourse and teaching to ideological and cultural production.’ (qtd. in Herndl, *Teaching* 350)

Here again we see the writing classroom linked to the language of transformation. Students are “empowered” through writing instruction to “transform [culture] from within.” However, because this empowerment is made possible by training students to “succeed in the dominant culture,” students may be transformed into the wrong kinds of people – people with vested interests in maintaining the dominant culture. The student’s potential for personal transformation is worrisome here: the non-transformed student is figured as both anxious to change culture and needing to be empowered to do so as she complies with her technical manuals ; the transformed student has had her “thinking” “changed” so that she is invested in preserving the status quo. In this way, the writing classroom, especially the professional and “nonacademic writing” classroom, is positioned to possibly do more harm than good. Because these narratives present the writing classroom as having significant cultural power and present the writing student as something of a tabula rasa to be inscribed by the writing instructor, teachers of writing are urged by Bizzell to be conscious of the ideological and cultural work in which they engage. The conflict between training students to succeed in the same culture they are being empowered to change is often addressed by linking professional and “nonacademic” writing instruction to citizenship.

Fueled by anxiety about the presumed transformative power of professional writing pedagogy, professional writing scholars have focused on “public discourse” and “social action” in the last two decades. Cezar Ornatowski and Linn Bekins write that during the decade between 1994 and 2004 “concerns with ethics in technical communication scholarship and teaching have led to broader interest in the relationship between technical communication and the quality of public life” (251). This reflects a belief that technical communication impacts public life and, therefore, the people who produce technical communication affect public discourse. In response, scholars have sought

to open up the field to civic advocacy and action and make it responsive to progressive political agendas focused on individual and collective empowerment and emancipation. In a word, the goal is to ‘civil-ize’ technical communication by disengaging it from its origins in, and bondage to, industrial-bureaucratic practice and recuperating it under the aegis of rhetoric as deliberative discursive practice, democratic in spirit and practice and focused on human needs and concerns. (Ornatowski and Bekins 252)

The emphasis on empowerment and emancipation here, like Weisser’s language of “transformation,” suggests that contemporary theorists of writing pedagogy, like their nineteenth-century evangelical counterparts, seek to promote a kind of secular salvation of the writing student and – through the student – society. The first step in “civil-izing” technical communication would seem to be to “civil-ize” the technical writing student, that is, to acculturate these students to progressive values which emphasize active citizenship. These “civil-izing” programs are justified by the origins of professional writing in “industrial-bureaucratic practice.” As the child of this industrial-bureaucratic system, professional writing is

represented as both enslaved – in “bondage” – and sick – in need of recuperation under the “aegis of rhetoric.”<sup>68</sup>

The main alternative to the technocrat or “slave” is the student as citizen-professional writer. The metaphor of the student as citizen-professional writer undergirds Dale Sullivan’s argument that teachers of technical writing need

to act on the ideal that all citizens, though workers, are responsible political agents; it is to act as though slavery was abolished and not just restructured; and it is to treat the individual as a unified whole, not as a person who must divide his or her personality between the roles of the worker and the citizen. (380-381)

Central to Sullivan’s argument is his belief that functionalist technical writing instruction potentially alienates the writer as worker from the writer as citizen. This schizophrenic individual apparently builds a firewall between her private beliefs and her workplace responsibilities. Sullivan characterizes this compartmentalization as “slavery” and implies that the writing instructor is in the enviable position of emancipating worker writers by treating them as “unified whole[s].” Sullivan’s desire to integrate the two roles is echoed by Mike Markel, who writes that “[t]echnical communicators must act, both in their professional capacities as communicators and as citizens” (5). So, too, argue Michelle Elbe and Lynee Lewis Gaillet who, building off of Billie Wahlstrom’s call to educate technical and professional writing students to be “effective citizens,” contend that professional and technical writing courses need to address “ethical literacies, which potentially can help students become not only effective writers but also engaged citizens who effect change in their communities” (341). Thus, the professional writing student must be transformed into a citizen, which necessarily entails going through an ethical

education which is alluded to but never described in detail. This transformed student is then expected to transform her community through civic engagement.

Because of this responsibility, some scholars such as Elbe and Gaillet marry ethical civic engagement with “effectiveness,” a value often touted in professional writing textbooks.<sup>69</sup> Efficacy is re-formed in Elbe and Gaillet’s article as a strategy of citizen-professionals, and, indeed, there is a hint that professional writers, with their training in producing effective prose, may make the most potent community reformers. Indeed, Carolyn Rude imagines that the civic action undertaken by citizen-professional writers can emerge from their professional work:

The preparation of students in technical and professional communication for civic engagement presumes their participation in social action as citizens but also perhaps as professionals employed for their expertise in communication . . . As volunteers and professionals, they can participate in the research, debate, and strategic action to promote policy changes determined to serve the public interest.  
(271)

In the civic engagement Rude envisions the professional writing student as prepared to transform institutions from within, through their “expertise,” as a citizen-professional writer. Interestingly, all professional writing students in this pedagogy are prepared for “social action as citizens” while only some of these students might be employed as professional writers. Focusing primarily on civic engagement, this version of professional writing pedagogy shifts its central focus away from cultivating “expertise in communication.” Curiously, it is unclear who has agency to “determine” which policy changes “serve the public interest”; Rude emphasizes the citizen-professional writer’s roles as a “volunteer” or “professional,” roles that do not presuppose

that the writer determines what changes to advocate. In this way, even in civic action, the professional writer appears to be a kind of instrument for others' agendas.

The level of the citizen-professional writer's agency in scholarly discussions fluctuates, reflecting the narratives that frame the writer's role as well as the labels used to name this role. The shift from technocrat to citizen carries with it an impetus to action; and it is within discussions of "action" that "the social" or "the public" are invoked. The emphasis on the citizen's responsibility to act has produced a variety of labels for who the professional writing student (or teacher) becomes as a citizen-professional. Eble and Gaillet, for example, shift through a series of related labels for students in their articles, borrowing "public intellectual" from Antonio Gramsci via Ellen Cushman and "community intellectual" from Frank Farmer (Eble and Gaillet 342). They also call upon the more established language of critical thinking, asserting that "many of our students have the potential to become *active agents* of change" if they are taught to be critical thinkers (350) (italics mine).

Eble and Gaillet are interested in imagining that citizen-professional writers have agency, empowered through critical thinking, which affords them access to the public and the community. Like many advocates of the "public turn" in composition, they suggest that service-learning is central to transforming students into these citizen-professional writers:

In providing educational settings that encourage students to develop a civic mindset, we help alleviate disciplinary tension between teaching practical skills and teaching rhetoric as a civic virtue. As a result of this approach, students will be prepared to apply their educational experiences to the communities in which they live, work, and serve. (351)

In this example, students “develop a civic mindset” which allows them to contribute to the communities to which they belong – service-learning provides an ethical education. This ethical education serves two purposes: it seeks to make connections between educational experiences and communities and it seeks to “alleviate” instructors’ tension about an apparent rift between “practical skills” and “virtue.” Yet, the same scholars advocating for this means of transforming writing students into ethical citizens tend not to name the particular ethics the student is being encouraged to adopt. I suspect this is because of the ambivalence about asserting the superiority of one set of ethical values over another. Thus, this assertion is, by implication, left to the sites of the service-learning. This has led to significant concern about the kinds of ethical education professional writing students might receive through their service-learning and who these students may be transformed into through these experiences. In these versions of service-learning, this “preparation” to function as a citizen-professional writer serves two masters – the community and what is caricatured as students’ desire for professional experience. Rude is frank about the dual goal of service-learning in professional writing; she asserts that “[t]he preparation of students in technical and professional communication for civic engagement presumes their participation in social action as citizens but also perhaps as professionals employed for their expertise in communication” (271). The student is engaged in social action as a citizen and in gaining professional expertise.

Service-learning functions in some of these discussions, then, as an opportunity for apprenticeship, preparing students for their roles as citizens and professional writers. While service-learning is often tied to the rhetoric of citizen education, it is also represented as potentially exposing students to the very corporate values this education was meant to counter. In this way, professional writing students are potentially set up to follow their professional



writing instructors in what Jack Bushnell labels the “*internal[ization]* of corporate paradigms” (175). Bushnell critiques this desire:

In our eagerness to obtain real workplace experience for our young technical-writers-in-training, we don’t challenge students’ own strongly held faith in the corporate model as goal, an end point, characterized by affirmation, stability, prosperity, and meaning. So, to the extent that we allow that narrative to be perpetuated in our classrooms, we also run the risk of failing to encourage questioning and critique as important, self-distinguishing professional and political acts. (176)

Bushnell picks up on the language of the “real” that often justifies the public turn in composition – the “real world” and “real experience” oppose the writing classroom which, presumably, is a site of pretend, fake, or practice experience. This construction of the classroom as not-real is similar to the construction of the classroom as not-public, where any writing venue outside the classroom – even in a corporation – becomes a “public” writing experience.

In some claims about service-learning, the significance of providing students with professional experience is privileged over all else. Deborah Bosley, for instance, argues that students gain from service-learning by learning to be “practitioners”:

faculty can seek ways to engage students as practioners, thereby increasing student engagement with business people and members of the university and external community. Many academics have long argued for the value of project-based learning in which students are engaged in writing or communications that involve purposes, audience, and contexts beyond the university. The exigencies

created by such writing assignment teach students about corporate cultures in ways that text-based case studies cannot. (35)

Bosely's emphasis is on acculturating students to corporate culture. J. Blake Scott suggests that this kind of service-learning pedagogy arises from a "hyperpragmatist" ideology that "is primarily concerned with helping students understand and successfully adapt to the writing processes, conventions, and values of disciplinary and workplace discourse communities" (291).

<sup>70</sup> In the scenes of instruction conjured by this critique of service-learning, service-learning projects are presented as the training wheels for future corporate success. Scott worries that "students may . . . see little transformative power in their [service-learning] work" if the class is structured around a "narrow focus on discrete rhetorical situations and the production processes of specific discourse communities" (293). Without a move to a larger frame, "[t]hese limitations work together to narrowly position students as preprofessional" (293). So, instead of students not being "transformed," they are transformed into the wrong type of people – preprofessionals.

For Scott there is an inherent tension in positioning service-learning as both civic education and preprofessional experience. Scott, for instance, is skeptical about importing an apprenticeship model into professional writing, particularly in regard to service-learning. Scott argues that naming students "apprentices" derails efforts to cultivate a civic mindset since "[t]hey must learn and adapt to their organization's values and discourse conventions" which can result in situations where students are encouraged to "view their sponsoring organizations as practice clients whose accommodation is their main concern" (295). Students, according to Scott, are more apt to seek "accommodation" with the discourse communities they are learning to enter when they see service-learning – and, I would argue, scenario-based classroom activities – as professionalizing activities.

In public-oriented writing pedagogies which equate service-learning with civic education students are often positioned as developing ethically-sound habits of mind through participation in communities outside the classroom. The responsibility shouldered by the writing instructor in these scenarios is indeed heavy. However, even as the writing classroom is described as occasioning civic education through, for instance, service-learning, the particulars of this education are left unspoken. Ornatowski and Bekins critique this elision, writing that

[t]here is an assumption here of a relatively unproblematic transfer of skills between the classroom, the community, and the workplace: the community is a kind of transitional halfway house through which technical writers, after doing their time, practically automatically emerge into the workplace as civic-minded rhetoricians. (255)

According to Ornatowski and Bekins the use of service-learning as means of exposing technical (or professional) writing students to a civic education too often assumes that “civic-mindedness” is infused into technical writing students through a kind of alchemy that happens when they apply their “skills” in community settings. This naïveté on the part of students and instructors, for Ornatowski and Bekins, leads to a situation in which students “equate ‘real life’ with ‘civic,’ an equation which is problematic” since civic values are then determined by those structuring the institutions of “real life” (255).<sup>71</sup>

Critiquing naïve assumptions about service-learning in professional writing, as Ornatowski and Bekins do here, may reveal the problem of displacing the responsibility for inculcating students, who are apparently blank slates, with civic virtue, but it does not get closer to the real problem of identifying and legitimating the civic virtues these scholars want public-oriented professional writing instruction to advance. The importance of “the civic’s” role in

conversations about the direction of composition's public turn may partially account for the resurgent emphasis on rhetoric. Teachers and scholars oriented to the public may find familiar "the construction of the ethical rhetor, motivated by the spirit of civitas to employ rhetoric for worthy and socially beneficial ends, [which] was the ultimate goal of many classical education systems" (Pemberton ix).

Often, writing scholars theorize the role of ethics in the "public turn" in highly abstract terms which obscure the myriad complications attending to ethics. Porter, for instance, asserts that we need to develop an "art of moral judgment" which "requires a strong sense of values and priorities and principles, but does not leverage those values and priorities in top-down, rules-oriented procedures" (203). His prescription for exercising the "art of moral judgment" in writing, which includes "marshalling of options and alternatives, some care in determining the conditions of one's rhetorical setting, and some respect for the variances of human action," does not, however, anticipate the difficulties of accommodating opposing sets of values that can lead writers to value one set of alternatives over another (209).

Porter seems to think that an "art of moral judgment" would foster consensus about the "common good": "we have to use rhetoric, ultimately, to enable solidarity: a solidarity that does not build itself on a rockbed of universal strictures, but that is a symbolically constructed solidarity of opinions that we build for our common good because we need a common good" (Porter 213). Because rhetoric is the means for enabling solidarity, the writing teacher has a unique responsibility to the common good. This burden is only heightened for professional and technical writing teachers, since, according to Katz, "[t]echnical writing . . . always leads to action, and thus always impacts on human life; in technical writing, epistemology necessarily leads to ethics" (Katz *qtd in* Ornatowski, "Ethics" 157). Katz, like Markel, recognizes one of the

central dilemmas inherent to the study of rhetorical education since the *Gorgias* – effective communication is not necessarily ethically sound; persuasion does not rely on virtue. Thus, Markel can assert that ethics “is logically prior to the concerns of rhetoric, which is the study of the art of communicating effectively” (21).

Certainly, the ethical frameworks that students – and teachers – bring into a writing classroom are already shaped by diverse forces and life experiences; so what, then, should writing teachers do with the desire, expressed by Bizzell, “to feel, with classical rhetoricians as Isocrates and Quintilian, that I am shaping *good* people by my instruction”? (282). Ironically, with all of the attention focused on the figure of the students in these discussions of writing pedagogy as civic education, in the end, the true subject of these discussions seems to be the teacher. The student is often portrayed as raw material put into one end of the semester and emerging at the other end either a soulless technocrat or virtuous progressive. In contrast, recognizing that students enter into the writing classroom with moral and ethical systems both makes the writing instructor’s role less god-like and more interesting since the student is identified as having more agency than she does in many of the previous accounts.

One way of incorporating student agency into public-oriented writing instruction is to focus the course on examining what Carolyn Miller calls “the conditions of one’s own participation” in various writing communities (52). Miller argues that

Our teaching of writing should present mechanical rules and skills against a broader understanding of why and how to adjust or violate the rules, of the social implications of the roles a writer casts for himself or herself and for the reader, and of the ethical repercussions of one’s words. (52)

Miller approaches writing pedagogy as a mode through which students come to “an understanding of how to belong to a community.”<sup>72</sup> Her contention that “to write well is to understand the conditions of one’s own participation” in a community provides students with an opportunity for reflection and for potentially constructing the conditions of their participation. The student here is not passively acculturated into a community. Writing is a process that has the potential to reveal the constructedness of the writer’s subjectivity and the relationship between that subjectivity and a larger “community” to herself. Miller’s suggestions that technical writing students should be taught “the rules” *and* “how to adjust or violate the rules” positions the student as an ethical knower, as having something to contribute.

In order for public-oriented writing pedagogies to teach students how to recognize “the rules” and how to “adjust or violate” them, these classes must focus on the cultural work of literacy activities. For example, in 1996, Johndan Johnson-Eilola called for “shifting the focus on communication beyond the technology and toward social contexts and processes” in order to “provide a general strategy for not merely critiquing current practices but also for changing them” (190). In this vision of technical writing pedagogy, students are taught not to be technocrats but rather writers aware of “social contexts and processes.” This awareness, in turn, paves the way for acting on and changing current practices. Rude envisions, for instance, preparing students to be

Professional writers [who] continue to be responsible for accurate and usable texts, but at the very least they need to understand the consequences of those texts for immediate and extended audiences, for the present and for a possible future, for other related texts, and for the values that constitute a society. (Rude 285)

In this formulation, the citizen-professional writer is, at minimum, responsible for recognizing the consequences of the documents he produces. But “understanding the consequences” for one’s professional activities is a far cry from reforming or overhauling the institutions that organize these activities.

James Thomas Zebroski offers a more vigorous version of training students to recognize and intervene in the cultural work of writing. He writes that making “literacy and power a public issue in [his] classroom, the topic of investigative inquiry,” he sees “the students as a task force or investigative squad who work as a team to look into these issues locally” (85). For Zebroski, “this strategy of resistance includes sending students out across campus and across the city to conduct interviews, to observe, to collect and analyze texts that come from these communities” (85). Students here are not acculturating themselves to a community. Instead, they are studying and analyzing a local community from a critical distance, which potentially prepares them to apply this critical perspective to communities in which they participate. Zebroski connects experience and theory in this course, tying the collection of data to an “an investigative inquiry” into “literacy and power.”

Although this public-oriented writing pedagogy is described as a “strategy of resistance,” Zebroski focuses less on producing changes in the community than training – perhaps transforming – his students into “a task force” invested in analyzing the conditions of the community and the potential for change. The language of “task force” and “investigative squad” is the language of non-governmental organizations, journalism, and the police, positioning the students as professionalizing themselves as future members of the governing institutions that regulate and “serve” “communities.”

The focus on analyzing the cultural work of public-oriented writing opens up space for the student to contribute to discussions about the relationships between writing instruction on the one hand and civic and ethical formations on the other. Recognizing that students can contribute to this discussion relieves some of the burden writing instructors must shoulder even as it admits the possibility that the writing classroom may function, then, as a site in which citizens both agree and disagree about important issues. Writing instruction, at its best, positions writing as a technology that produced self-reflection and through this self-reflection the possibility of change – for the writer and the reader. The writing student is still positioned here as potentially transformed, but she is consciously participating in her own transformation.

The public-oriented writing classroom, ideally, is a space that introduces students as critical thinkers, readers and writers to a range of discourses, including those labeled civic, “public,” or professional. These classes should also acknowledge that specialized discourse changes over time and put pressure on students to see themselves as writers who will be inventing, altering, and responding to these changes. In this way, students are positioned to “help define the direction of their organization rather than ceding that role to others” and to affect the forms, language and conventions of the discourses they enter (Bushnell 176). Elbe and Gaillet remind us, for example, that “professional and technical communicators who are socially literate may also be in positions to reform or change existing organizational settings (350).

Shifting away from orienting public and professional writing around the mastery of business writing formats reverses the historical shift to textbook organization around form prompted, according to Robert Connors, by the desire to bring technical writing “closer to the businesses and industries that actually used the forms that were taught” (343). Instead of acceding to the claim reflected in this form orientation that “[t]he only good criterion for



technical writing is ‘does it work’” (Connors 343), we should be asking students to pay attention to what Rude calls the “overlooked” “discourse of contesting positions” in professional writing (354). These “contesting positions” include alternatives to the traditional formats imposed on professional discourse. Rude claims that professional writing teachers have “too often [been] blinded . . . to the differences and the struggles within professional discourses” (354). This “blindness” works against what Berlin describes as the role of the literacy teacher, which is to “supply students with heuristic strategies for decoding their characteristic ways of representing the world” (102). It is still rare to imagine that courses in professional writing are subject to “critical pedagogy,” that they might, like other literacy courses “empower students to intervene in their own self-formation and to transform the oppressive feature of the wider society that make such an intervention necessary” (McLaren xi), but that is precisely what they should do.

#### Conclusion: Toward A Pedagogy Beyond the Public

I find myself unsatisfied with the language currently available to describe the kinds of discourses available for the study of what I have been calling public-oriented writing instruction. The public/private binary often seems inevitable, but my historical research has shown that the distinctions we recognized between the public and private today do not adequately describe the past. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, early and mid-nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals did not draw sharp distinctions between “private” and “public” correspondence. In fact, I only began to notice the categorization of letters into these groups in late-nineteenth century letter-writing manuals and textbooks. However, the letters designated “private” in these texts include those types of letters focused on today in professional writing textbooks while the letters the nineteenth-century texts label “public” are often excluded from these same modern

texts. An 1889 textbook, *Business and Social Correspondence*, explicates the differences between the two kinds of letters<sup>73</sup>:

Private Letters are those intended only for the persons to whom they are addressed; and they are divided into two classes: Social and Business . . . Public Letters are such as are usually addressed to some particular person, but intended for the public. They relate, as a rule, to matters of general interest, and are given to the public through the medium of the newspaper and magazine press. (7)

The distinction between public and private letters here is grounded in measuring the breadth of the intended audience. Because business letters are simply one of the two classes of private letters, the late nineteenth-century textbooks – in stark contrast to modern professional writing textbooks – also pay attention to social letters, or what H.T. Loomis renames “letters of sentiment” in the 1897 *Practical Letter Writing* (7). This attention is most likely a remnant of the highly heteroglossic character of earlier letter-writing manuals. “Publicness,” in the late-nineteenth-century manuals is determined by the scope of readership. J. Willis Westlake explains in *How to Write Letters* (1876) that

Public Letters are letters in form only. They are essays or reports intended for the public, but addressed to some individual. The writers adopt this form because it gives a personal interest to what they say, and because it admits of a more familiar style of treatment than a formal essay. (14)

For Westlake, public discourse is “more familiar” than the discourse of a “formal essay” and the writer reveals his “personal interest” in his topic. In contrast, modern professional writing textbooks often focus solely on business correspondence and on efficiency; Walter Oliu et al., for instance, warn students that poorly-written business correspondence “waste[s] time and money”

(261).<sup>74</sup> Extending the genealogy for professional and technical writing pedagogy into the nineteenth century complicates our understandings of how these forms of writing might be positioned vis-à-vis workplace and civic discourses.

The perspective lent by history compels us to ask to what extent the language of publics is adequate for describing the work of contemporary writing instruction. There are productive ways of construing the concept of publics, although, as I have demonstrated, the centrifugal force of the public/private binary may make the language of publics inadequate for the task of describing the complex exchanges between what might be described as degrees of privacy and degrees of publicity. However, there are certain concepts from public sphere theory which I would want to maintain if we were to move beyond a language of publics. A working definition of publics for writing pedagogy would insist, first, that publics are discursive; second, that there are a “host of competing counterpublics”; and, third, that “in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public sphere” (Fraser 7, 14).

Furthermore, framing contestation among “competing publics” as productive for democracy makes it possible for students to construct alternatives to dominant forms of discourse. Students can be encouraged to see themselves as simultaneously embodying multiple (possibly contesting) publics; this has a clear advantage over using the language of communities to discuss student writing because

technical communication students [have] the impression that they are merely speaking for a community that somehow organically preexists their rhetorical intervention and whose values they merely have to find . . . [this perception] may

actually be a serious disservice to their ability to discern the critical rhetorical, moral, and civic dimensions in what they do as professional communicators. (Ornatowski and Bekins 266)

The concept of community here determines that students see themselves as adopting the values of the community rather than shaping them. Public sphere theory, however, opens up the possibilities that students could find themselves contributing to – or constructing -- what Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics” (14).<sup>75</sup>

Fraser defines subaltern counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, interests and needs” (14). As an example, Fraser describes the

late-twentieth-century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic, with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places. In this public sphere, feminist women have invented new terms for describing social reality, including ‘sexism,’ ‘the double shift,’ ‘sexual harassment,’ and ‘marital, date, and acquaintance rape.’ Armed with such language, we have recast our needs and identities, thereby reducing, although not eliminating, the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres. (14-15)

The impact Fraser describes this feminist subaltern counterpublic having on official public spheres is dramatic; the circulation of new discourses affects material changes in the ways individuals relate to one another. By naming multiple sites within which new discourses were introduced and circulated, Fraser offers concrete examples for how one might go about forming a

subaltern counterpublic. In this way, Fraser's public sphere theory offers material ways to address, for instance, Nancy Welch's abstract call for "rhetorical space – that is, public space with the potential to operate as a persuasive public sphere" (477).

Kathryn Flannery's work on feminist literacy practices in the period between 1968 and 1975 is particularly instructive for writing scholars who adapt Fraser's public sphere theory. Flannery's work complicates descriptions of what Fraser might call the feminist counterpublic by attending to the debates surrounding using literacy practices to promote liberatory politics:

Some movement participants expressed considerable ambivalence about the role of literacy in women's lives because they recognized that it comprises not simply a benign set of skills but also culturally loaded practices that had operated historically as class marker, sign of patriarchal power, or a means to exercise hierarchical authority. At the same time, feminists were engaged in activities to increase women's access to the means of literate production and in the process reconceptualizing what literacy could be or do in feminist terms. (Flannery 2-3)

The feminist critiques of literacy as a set of "culturally loaded practices" resonates with the concerns expressed about professional writing literacies that I have discussed earlier in this chapter. I am struck, however, that unlike the feminists who Flannery describes as "reconceptualizing" literacy on their own "terms," few professional writing scholars seek to reconceptualize professional writing literacies in ways that break free from corporatized discourse.

What would such a reconceptualization look like? There is some evidence that this work of reconceptualization is already under way outside of professional writing curricula. Carolyn Matalene, for instance, has documented creative breaks from traditional formats, describing as

one example the poetry used as chapter dividers in a report on minority health produced by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (41). I believe the work of public and professional writing curricula in liberal arts education is to encourage reconceptualization of traditional, hierarchical forms of literacy. This entails teaching students to be critical readers of conventional modes of discourse – to encourage them to ask, for example, what kind of subjects they become by writing a public policy report – and inviting them to explore and invent alternatives to conventional modes of discourse. By emphasizing that publics are constructed and actively shaped by the acts of composing and exchanging writing, we give students a conceptual framework within which they can image how literacy practices can be reconceptualized over time.<sup>76</sup>

Pedagogy informed but not circumscribed by public sphere theory, then, can potentially foster the kind of agency that Jim Berlin envisions when he writes that “literacy enables the individual to understand that the conditions of experience are made by human agents and thus can be remade by human agents” (101). Structuring public-oriented writing courses around questions of agency opens up the possibility that students in professional writing classes can develop the theoretical tools to meet Porter and Sullivan’s call to effect “fundamental changes in the nature of workplace literacy” (qtd. in Henry 22). We can, for instance, invite students to investigate alternatives to the discursive forms and postures that circulate within specific institutions. We can ask students to explore the roads not commonly taken in the task-driven assignments that dominate professional writing textbooks. Another avenue for potentially effecting change in workplace literacy is to develop courses that take as their subject matter American cultures of work. In a course of this nature, students might read narrative – including

fictional narrative -- representations of workers and workplaces and might be asked to write pieces of creative non-fiction, poetry, or autoethnographies about cultures of work.<sup>77</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> As early as the seventeenth century, New England can be characterized as having a “broad participation in the world of print” fueled by Protestant devotion (Hall “Literacy” 181). The dual interest in American evangelical missions devoted to spreading literacy and Protestantism in the first half of the nineteenth-century might be seen as part of a struggle for cultural dominance among the new Americans. (See for example Mark A. Noll’s “The Evangelical Enlightenment and the Task of Theological Education” and “Revolution and the Rise of Evangelical Social Influence in North Atlantic Societies.” See also David Paul Nord’s *Faith in Reading*.)

<sup>2</sup> Catechisms are by definition denominational. I suspect, however, catechisms were in effect detached from their denominations when reprinted or approximated in widely-used school books. *The New England Primer*, which, according to Warren A. Nord, was the “most commonly used schoolbook in the colonies,” included Westminster Assembly’s Shorter Catechism (64-65). In the nineteenth century, as scholars like Nord have argued, dominate school texts, like the McGuffey Readers were catechistical content, as well (67). However, the theology of McGuffey is perhaps best described as mainline evangelical, reflecting the beliefs that served as common ground for the nineteenth-century’s great non-denominational voluntary organizations.



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<sup>3</sup> The American Sunday School Union formed in 1824; its mission was to “found and support Sunday schools” (Nord, *Faith* 77). The American Tract Society formed in 1825, uniting local and regional tract societies.

<sup>4</sup> This foundational belief in the significance of literacy to Protestant religious practice produced significant disputation about the responsibilities of slave-owners and the morality of slave-owning, particularly in response to legislation forbidding teaching slaves to read and write.

<sup>5</sup> Nineteenth-century evangelicalism is very different from the version of fundamentalist, politically conservative Protestantism sometimes labeled “evangelical” in the United States today. Although often used interchangeably today, “evangelicalism” and “fundamentalism” were not synonymous in the nineteenth-century. Nineteenth-century evangelicalism, while doctrinally conservative – for instance, in debates about the Trinity – often fueled participation in what could be called “progressive” causes like abolition. In fact, Sydney Ahlstrom argues that the modern fundamentalist movement formed in the late nineteenth century to challenge American evangelicalism which was associated with the middle class “mainstream” (805, 806).

<sup>6</sup> The persistence of the public/domestic binary which maps schooling and religion into a “domestic” space testifies to the influence of Ann Douglas’s *The Feminization of American Culture*. Many critics, such as Amy Kaplan and Nina Baym, have attempted, in Glen Hendler’s words, to “disarticulate” the domestic/public binary (685).

<sup>7</sup> For Habermas, the “decisive mark” of the modern public sphere is “the published word” (16). In Nancy Fraser’s reading of Habermas, the public sphere is “an arena” of “discursive relations” (2) within which “a body of ‘private persons’ assembled to discuss matters of ‘public concern’ or ‘common interest’” (4).

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<sup>8</sup> The pagination in “*I am afraid I have a soul*”, and other books for children” is non-consecutive, and many of the stories have the same pagination. To clarify the citation I have included the number assigned to the tract by the table of contents before the page reference. Thus, this excerpt is from tract 48, pages 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> These societies “were key developers of the new technologies of print, including machine papermaking, stereotyping, and steam-powered printing” (Nord, “Systemic” 242).

<sup>10</sup> A note of caution: Nord bases his figures on reports published by the societies themselves.

<sup>11</sup> This image of the tutelary relationship is taken up and reversed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

<sup>12</sup> Zboray follows Ann Douglas’s lead in arguing that the male clergy’s authority, public importance, and scholasticism was castrated by women’s disproportionate church membership.

<sup>13</sup> Brown works with a collection of unpublished albums housed at The Library Company of Philadelphia.

<sup>14</sup> Tract literature belongs to a long tradition of Protestant narrative and often alludes to foundational texts like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and Fox’s *Book of Martyrs*.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander is an active critic of the wide-ranging ideas in the texts he reads. He is deeply concerned, for instance, about “German atheism,” “pantheism,” “Emersonism,” “Carlyle-ism,” and Unitarianism (although he is remarkably tolerant of Catholicism) (qtd. in Hall 290). Yet he finds pleasure in fine writing, even if he doesn’t share the writer’s beliefs. For example, although he rejects Coleridge’s “Platonism,” he writes, “heartily and religiously do I believe that our money-loving and gain-reckoning generation would be profited by the leaven of the Coleridge and Wordsworth philosophical poesy, even though this has its whimsies” (234).

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<sup>16</sup> The story takes place in Scotland and may have been, originally, published by an English tract society. The lack of comment on the Scottish setting in the ATS edition suggests that the importation and reprinting of British tract literature was a common event.

<sup>17</sup> While there is no date indicated in the print, there is a handwritten date of November 1, 1857 on the first page.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen examines a contemporary example of using proof texts in a *Sojourner's* article about the "Promise Keepers." She explains that Promise Keeper CEO Bill McCartney pulled a verse out of Isaiah in order to defend his position that men are the heads of their families and that "spousal equality in marriage" is inconsistent with the Bible. Van Leeuwen demonstrates that McCartney ignores the context of – and even misquotes – the passage. In her reading the passage is praising God and not specifying marital power relations.

<sup>19</sup> Although I am concentrating on what are purportedly non-denominational tracts in this chapter, it is interesting to note how individual tracts may telegraph messages about which denominations are most desirable. In this case, we might imagine that the "old Scotch woman" is Calvinist or Presbyterian.

<sup>20</sup> Universalists held that "Christ's sacrifice had purchased salvation not only for the Elect but for the entire human race" (Ahlstrom 482). This belief conflicts with the emphasis in tract literature on conversion.

<sup>21</sup> This book, published in 1804, was written by a former Baptist and "had [a] great effect on organized Universalism, which increasingly moved toward Boston Unitarianism in theology even while remaining socially and spiritually" distinct (Ahlstrom 482).

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<sup>22</sup> Reading is the most emphasized form of literacy in these texts, although writing – particularly letter writing – is also depicted.

<sup>23</sup> The setting of *The Widow's Son* suggests that it was originally an English tract, although the version I read was published by the ATS.

<sup>24</sup> “But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1 Cor. 6.17).

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Knox argues that religious enthusiasm “decried the use of human reason as a guide to any sort of religious truth” (3). Certainly this kind of enthusiasm conflicts with the evangelical emphasis on reading as intellectual work.

<sup>26</sup> This double foothold in secular and sacred literary cultures has precedent in the history of the English novel. Hall, for example, describes as “transitional” fiction like *Clarissa* which “has a section on death which Richardson regarded as in keeping with conduct manuals on how to die” (76)

<sup>27</sup> The enormous growth of “megachurches,” particularly in newly-established exurbs, along with heightened public debates about the separation of church and state, suggests a renewed vigor in the ways Americans long to incorporate religion into their lives.

<sup>28</sup> Nina Baym suggests that *The Lamplighter* is “derivative” of *The Wide, Wide World* (Introduction xvi). Cindy Weinstein has demonstrated convincingly that sentimental fiction, particularly *The Wide, Wide World*, is discursively linked with slave narratives (131).

<sup>29</sup> Freire’s term, “*conscientizacao*,” describes a richer, more complex process than that implied by the English approximation of “consciousness-raising.” For Freire, “*conscientizacao* represents the *development* of the awakening of critical awareness” (19). This critical awareness

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is the recognition that “men” are “objects, not Subjects,” a recognition which can only occur through praxis, the combined process of action and reflection (20).

<sup>30</sup> Tompkins reports that Warner was a “Visitor for the New York City Tract Society,” meaning that she worked to distribute tracts to people at home (592).

<sup>31</sup> This understanding of God’s interest in people denied the right to read and write is used by Harriet Beecher Stowe to argue that slavery is an unchristian institution in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). On her deathbed, Little Eva tells her family’s slaves, “You must be Christians” (251). However, when she begins to tell them how they can become Christians, she becomes distressed when she recalls that they can’t read. However, she soothes herself, saying “Nevermind . . . I have prayed for you; and I know Jesus will help you, even if you can’t read” (251). The pathos of Little Eva’s “even if” here underscores the central role of literacy in a (Protestant) Christian life.

<sup>32</sup> I am not interested in this discussion in the controversies around actual authorship. See Lynn A. Casmier-Paz for a smart discussion of the ways slave narratives deconstruct the concept of naming and authorship.

<sup>33</sup> A similar formulation is put forth by Uncle’s Tom’s dissipated master, St. Claire, who professes a conclusion opposite to Brent’s, claiming that American slaves are better off than the British laboring classes since at least some masters keep their slaves fed and clothed. Although he claims both populations are similarly unable to learn because of minds “stupefied and animalized by every bad influence from the hour of birth” (200). Yet, he claims “that the negro is naturally more impressible to religious sentiment than the white” (200). Stowe debunks St. Claire’s claims that slavery could be seen as a lesser evil than “wage slavery” with Tom’s

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subsequent trials. However, Tom's religious conviction does suggest that Stowe shares St. Claire's assessment of his religiosity.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, in *Roads to Rome*, Jenny Franchot discusses how Joshua Huntington claims that his conversion to Catholicism is fueled by his disillusionment with the Calvinist reading practices and interpretations he is exposed to at Princeton. In his 1868 *Gropings After Truths*, an account of his conversion to Catholicism, Huntington writes, "The simple fact is, that the Bible is a rule of faith to Protestants to this extent, and no further, that, having received their faith from the oral instruction of their parents and teachers, without the Bible, they have recourse to it in after-years, merely to find in it the things which they have been taught, and which they already believe" (qtd. in Franchot 283).

<sup>35</sup> Of course, Stowe's sister, Catherine Beecher, is a well-known pedagogue who actually employed Stowe as a composition teacher.

<sup>36</sup> Larcom's childhood and young adulthood is roughly contemporaneous with the years the other texts I read in this chapter were published. In this way, the claims Larcom makes about the cultural of evangelical literacy activities in her past can be understood as nostalgic representations of the same culture these other texts were actively participating in.

<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that letters, according to Mary Favret, have been feminized in critical discourse to the extent that they have been read as not "having a 'public voice'" (19). Like "sentimental" fiction and the worlds of religion and education, the letter has been associated with "the figure of the woman" (19).

<sup>38</sup> I am reading these instructional texts in order to unearth the ways these texts seek to construct the meaning of uses of literacy activities. I do not assume that these texts are necessarily

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successful in imposing certain meaning on actual readers and writers; following Roger Chartier, I imagine that there may be “gaps” between the uses of literacy suggested by the manuals and the actual ways individual users may have read or misread, used or “misused,” the manuals (6-7).

<sup>39</sup> These explicit instructions about how to use the manuals and how to learn to write seem, if Eve Tavor Bannet is right in her reading of 18<sup>th</sup>-century manuals, to be a nineteenth-century innovation. Bannet claims that the eighteenth-century manuals she traces in their trans-Atlantic circulation were “silent about how a reader-writer was supposed to use them” (54).

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Cooke was a pseudonym for John Cooke (Bannet 194).

<sup>41</sup> Between 1800 and 1818 Hogan printed six editions of *The New Universal Letter Writer* (Bannet 214); and he printed at least two editions between 1830 and 1834. Turner’s *Parlour Letter-Writer* was also printed by Philadelphia printers and went through nine printings between 1835 and 1854. *The Fashionable American Letter Writer* is by far the most successful manual out of those I examine here. It went through at least twenty-five printings between 1818 and 1860 and was published heavily in New England and on the western frontier in cities such as Lockport, NY; Cleveland; and Cincinnati.

<sup>42</sup> Extrapolating from the characters represented as writing and receiving the model letters, the age range of these intended users would be roughly early teens to early twenties.

<sup>43</sup> Here is yet another example of this language from an 1836 edition of the *New Universal*: “it may be safely said, that throughout the whole series of the letters the language is in general correct, -- the sentiments strictly moral, -- the principles inculcated for the government of life excellent, -- and the lessons of domestic management and economy, are drawn from the most solid experience and observation” (9).

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<sup>44</sup> Could it be that Hardie, who is identified in the front matter as the author of *Principles of the Latin Grammar* and an educator, is alluding to the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*?

<sup>45</sup> Parts of this seem to have been “borrowed” from Hardie’s 1817 *Epistolary Guide*

<sup>46</sup> This divide produced the splintering apart of rhetoric and English literary studies and is manifested today in composition and professional/technical writing programs which are housed outside of English studies.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Johnson is a figure who is often alluded to – or “borrowed from” – by nineteenth-century manuals. He wrote an influential letter-writing manual, *The Compleat Introduction to the Art of Writing Letters* which was published in 1758 (Bannet 80).

<sup>48</sup> Compare with this claim in Peyre-Ferry’s *Art of Epistolary Composition* (1826): “Every person, in the course of his life, finds it necessary to write a letter. Consequently, the rules of epistolary style, should form a part of the most ordinary education” (18). And this, from *The Fashionable American Letter Writer* (1828): “An acquaintance with the common forms of letter writing, is of such universal necessity, that no person can transact business with satisfaction or decency without some knowledge of them (xiii). Or this, from *The New Universal Letter-Writer* (1836): “Men of all ranks and of every profession, are now so fully convinced of the great importance and utility of epistolary correspondence to almost every occasion of life, that little need be said by way of preface to such a volume as this” (9).

<sup>49</sup> The pagination in this text is inconsistent, apparently from the conjoining of two separate texts without repaginating. I have, therefore, numbered the two halves in order to distinguish which half of the text the page falls on. Therefore, “2.4” indicates the quote is from part 2, page 4.



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<sup>50</sup> Constable also locates this figure in a letter sent by Patriarch Nicholas I of Constantinople (13).

<sup>51</sup> Peyre-Ferry likewise advises, “Do not consult grammarians, or lexicons, when you write a letter: depend rather on an attentive perusal of the best epistolary authors of both sexes. Study the letters of women in preference to those of men” (13).

<sup>52</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:53-57.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Noll, among others, has discussed how the practice of “discipline” is a central feature of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. The key virtues recommended by the model letters I discuss are identical to the virtues sought through evangelical personal discipline in tract stories and evangelically-informed literature.

<sup>54</sup> As I noted about the porous boundaries between categories in Turner’s manual, this letter is found under the heading “Letters of Advice, Affection, &c.” even though a similar set of letters – “From a Father to a son, on negligence in his affairs” – is included under “Letters of Business.”

<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, the model letters in many contemporary professional writing textbooks also deploy a version of the unegoistic or self-abnegating writer. However, in these model letters, this self-abnegation is manifested through a writerly presence vacated of subjectivity. By stripping contemporary model letter writers of “the personal,” these textbooks offer fewer strategies for resistance and critique than their nineteenth-century counterparts.

<sup>56</sup> Letter-writing manuals and, especially, textbooks published in the decades after the Civil War do begin to designate distinctions between business, familiar, and public writing.

<sup>57</sup> “Public-oriented” writing instruction is a broad category which includes writing pedagogy that focuses on students writing for audiences outside of the classroom. Advocates for versions of

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public-oriented writing pedagogy tend to envision writing pedagogy as a means for encouraging students to, as John Alberti says in the preface to his textbook *The Working Life*, “engage” with the world and “to use writing as social action” (xv). Although, as I demonstrate in this chapter, I find that the connotations associated with the concept of the public make the language of “publicness” problematic for describing the aims of writing pedagogy, I retain the term “public” when I discuss what I describe as “public-oriented writing instruction” as a way to reflect the conceptual language of the scholarly work I examine in this chapter.

<sup>58</sup> I use the term “professional writing” to refer to writing in all the professions and, thus, should be understood as encompassing “technical writing.”

<sup>59</sup> “Service-learning” is used in this chapter to refer to courses which ask students to volunteer in sites outside of the classroom which will allow the students to add experiential knowledge to the work they do in the course. The service the students undertake in these courses is “a vehicle for teaching specific course-based skills and strategies” (Bowdon and Scott). In the most productive scenarios, service-learning is not limited to reinforcing classroom lessons, but also provides opportunities – through class work – for students to reflect on and theorize their experiences. According to Bowdon and Scott, there are three main approaches to incorporating service-learning in writing courses: 1. asking students to document and reflect on volunteer work; 2. asking students to research about and write academic papers about volunteer work; 3. asking students to produce writing for the volunteer sites in which they work (3-4).

<sup>60</sup> The language of “the street(s)” was echoed in the 2002 CCCC theme, “Connecting the Text to the Street.”

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<sup>61</sup> When I refer to separate spheres here I refer to the construct that was promoted in the nineteenth-century and the ideological lens literary critics have used to read the cultural history of that period. I do not believe that this ideological construct fully accounts for material reality of lived experiences in the nineteenth-century.

<sup>62</sup> Trimbur wants to imagine the writing classroom as the “domestic space of the middle-class family” where the public and private merge (195).

<sup>63</sup> For critics who write about the supposed “feminization” of writing instruction see Eileen Schell, *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers*; Robert Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*; and Redding Sugg, *Motherteacher*.

<sup>64</sup> I focus on professional writing in this section instead of “street” or activist public writing pedagogies for a number of reasons. First, there has been a vigorous debate in professional and technical writing scholarship about what a “public” or “social” turn means for this pedagogy. Second, I see professional writing pedagogy as interestingly resonant with evangelical literacy campaigns in the sense that both literacy pedagogies, at the most reductive, can be seen as serving functionalist ends.

<sup>65</sup> I suspect these histories (*see* Robert Connors and Teresa Kynell) often over-emphasize the origination of professional writing in twentieth century engineering programs. Certainly, earlier business letter-writing textbooks, for instance, would have informed the formation of professional writing programs as well.

<sup>66</sup> Sullivan’s 1990 allusion to the “military-industrial complex,” a phrase made famous in Dwight Eisenhower’s farewell address, may be something of an anachronism.

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<sup>67</sup> This division between the writer and the agent with power is also explored by Donna Strickland in her description of the gendered division of labor between the apparatus of writing, the female secretary, and the composer, the male boss.

<sup>68</sup> This movement to “civil-ize” the professional writing students is joined to a complementary move among scholars calling for technical communication scholars to conduct research that takes “an increasingly political turn” (Blyler 33).

<sup>69</sup> Katz argues that by privileging efficiency, the Nazi bureaucracy made possible the technocratic discourse that organized and ran the state of terror.

<sup>70</sup> The emphasis on “efficiency” in these “hyperpragmatist endeavors are probably related to the emphasis on “practical” in rhetorics (Carr, Carr, and Shultz 9) and also calls to mind the utilitarian educational extremes of *Hard Times*.

<sup>71</sup> Ornatowski and Bekins are not shy about what they see as the dangers of giving organizations and communities outside of the classroom the authority to name civic virtues – they write that “[i]t is useful to note that every regime, including Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, had extensive programs of public service for the young – for example, Goebbel’s ‘Winterhilfe’ (winter help for the poor” (255).

<sup>72</sup> Versions of this argument appear also in David Bartholomae’s work, for instance in “Inventing the University,” and in Patricia Bizzell’s work on discourse communities.

<sup>73</sup> I refer to these late-century texts as “textbooks” and not “manuals,” the term I used in conjunction with the early and mid-century texts because they have the organization and apparatus of textbooks including assignments and exercises for students.

<sup>74</sup> Oliu et al.’s *Writing That Works* has gone through nine editions since 1980.

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<sup>75</sup> The concepts of counterpublics and subaltern counterpublics emerge from Negt and Kluge's, Michael Warner's, and Nancy Fraser's revisions to Habermasian theory which reflects the range of publics born out of particular communities, identities, class positions, and values.

<sup>76</sup> The writing classroom provides an opportunity to set up an inquiry into basic, and yet unanswered, questions about public sphere theory: What counts as circulation? How should we characterize twenty-one individuals exchanging writing and comments upon this writing? What happens if one of those individuals passes on some of the writing or a scrap of conversation to someone outside the original group? Can the occasion of the writing course serve as the impetus for the construction of a public?

<sup>77</sup> Nancy Koerbel and I designed a course like this for the Public and Professional Writing curriculum at the University of Pittsburgh. It is called "Narratives of the Workplace."

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