

# The Pulpit's Muse: Conversive Poetics in the American Renaissance

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THE PULPIT'S MUSE: CONVERSIVE POETICS IN THE AMERICAN  
RENAISSANCE

by

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ABSTRACT  
THE PULPIT'S MUSE  
CONVERSIVE POETICS IN THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

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This dissertation focuses on the interaction between poetic form and popular religious practice in the nineteenth century United States. Specifically, I aim to see how American poets appropriated religious tropes—and especially religious conversion—in their poetry with specific designs on their audience. My introduction analyzes the phenomenon of religious conversion up through the nineteenth century with help from psychologists and historians of religion, including William James and Sydney Ahlstrom. In the introduction, I also explore how revivalist conversion helped inform the poetics of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Chapter one focuses on Emerson's poetry, particularly as it enacts Emerson's poetic principles, in which the poet fills the role of the revivalist preacher. In chapter two, I study Jones Very's poetry as an extension of this project—namely, the appropriation of sermonic strategies employed by the poet to elicit conversion from his readers (a strategy that, in spite of conventional views of Very's later poetry, Very employed throughout his poetic career). Chapter three brings Jones Very into conversation with other contemporary poets—Elizabeth Fries Ellet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier—as they engaged visual art through ekphrastic poetry. These poems illustrate how popular art in the nineteenth-century U.S. sat at the intersection of aesthetic experience and religious practice and how the lines demarcating these two categories were becoming increasingly blurred. Chapter four observes how the poetry in religious and freethought periodicals reacted to this identity crisis of a New England negotiating its rationalist ideals with its Puritan inheritance. This chapter also includes an appended collection of previously uncollected newspaper poetry.

My dissertation contributes to the research field of American literature by offering an in-depth analysis of the interaction between nineteenth-century poetry and popular revivalist preaching, an interaction that is essential to understanding antebellum American poetry. More broadly, as throngs of Americans responded to preaching by finding themselves converted, they also settled into a new personal identity in the midst of a rapidly transforming society. This dissertation explores what role poetry had in that conversive process.

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## INTRODUCTION

In antebellum America, the long-standing figure of the minister was in flux. Broadly speaking, the mission of the minister was still to win converts and nurture believers, but these believers were not the same as they were in pre-Revolutionary America. The American population was expanding geographically, ideologically, and economically, and its ministers were evolving along with it. Similarly, the relationship between authorities and followers, writers and readers, and the sacred and secular were also changing. Many American poets, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jones Very, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Elizabeth Fries Ellet, organized their relationships with readers to include or represent the conversion experience. As religious and freethought<sup>1</sup> periodicals show, unheralded poetic contributors to newspapers also assumed this inherent connection between poetry and religious conversion.

But how would America reconcile its Puritan roots while becoming a more mercantile, materialist nation, and what role would poetry play? Could lives still be changed—could people still be converted—without the scaffolding of traditional religion? In the pages that follow, I will explore the role poetry played in the struggle for an American identity in the Antebellum United States. Poets would have to wrestle with a confluence of social, ideological, and political forces. In the 1830s, Andrew Jackson was simultaneously galvanizing and polarizing the country. Religious skepticism was

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<sup>1</sup> That is, periodicals like Abner Kneeland's *Boston Investigator* and Robert Dale Owen's and Fanny Wright's *Free Enquirer*, which published articles and poetry challenging religious orthodoxy and promoting progressive causes like contraception and workers' rights.

<sup>2</sup> In *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, David S. Reynolds describes Whitman's early exposure to the *Free Enquirer*, to which Whitman's father subscribed

being disseminated among the American public, and religious leaders were vying for American souls as poets were attempting to establish an American literary identity. As I will show in this study, the destinies of the pulpit and the poet were inextricably linked.

In his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman famously announced the death-knell of the priesthood:

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . . perhaps a generation or two . . . dropping off by degrees. A superior breed shall take their place . . . the gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women. Through the divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future . . . They shall not deign to defend immortality or God or the perfection of things or liberty or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul. They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth (Whitman 24-25).

In one sense, this vision makes sense in light of Whitman's early exposure to freethought journals, which often called for the abolition of the priesthood.<sup>2</sup> But Whitman's relationship to the clergy was not entirely negative. As David S. Reynolds writes, "Whitman on the one hand violently rejected American churches and on the other was vitally interested in American preaching and religion" (5618). For Whitman, the traditional priest has outlived his usefulness, and while it may take "awhile," Whitman

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<sup>2</sup> In *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, David S. Reynolds describes Whitman's early exposure to the *Free Enquirer*, to which Whitman's father subscribed when the poet was a child: "[Walter Whitman] exposed his family to the most radical thought of the day by subscribing to the *Free Enquirer* . . . These and other labor radicals of the decade ushered in a rhetoric class conflict [sic], defending 'productive,' virtuous workers against the 'idle' rich and calling for laws to aid the poor" (654). As I will discuss in Chapter 4, in the context of freethinking journals (descending largely from French Enlightenment thinking), the priesthood was part of the machinery keeping the lower classes down. For the French, of course, this meant Catholic priests, but for American freethinkers, this came to include Christian clerics more generally.



displays his faith that this vocation will be evolved out of society as the “new breed of poets” come to fulfill this role. But the doctrine they preach will be a repudiation of traditional European-American religious tradition, especially what was common in Whitman’s America. The poets will not condescend “to defend immortality or God or the perfection of things or liberty or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul” (25). The abstract principles inherent in religion and patriotic devotion are of no interest to these poets, who instead “find their inspiration in real objects today.” Clearly, Whitman is prophesying a revolution in poetics and religion, in which the poet takes on the priest’s garb and creates a new American religion. Indeed, in an 1857 notebook, Whitman refers to his poetic enterprise in *Leaves of Grass* as “*The Great Construction of the New Bible*” (Levine 145). Such a comment implies both the need for a new sacred text and the ability of the poet (and, in particular, Whitman himself) to create this new American scripture.

Several Whitman scholars have mined the religious dimension of Whitman’s work.<sup>3</sup> As Herbert J. Levine argues, Whitman saw “that American democracy needed to have its cardinal principles reformulated on a religious basis. Christianity, he saw, could not be the religion of the republic: its theology was monarchical and its doctrine of the Incarnation, privileging the divinity of one special person, was undemocratic” (148). For a new democracy, the old religion--orthodox Christianity that assumed original sin and the need for salvation through an all-powerful deity outside of nature—would not suffice. Here, Whitman is following the footsteps of Emerson, who wrote in his 1838 address, “it

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<sup>3</sup> Recently, *Whitman’s Ecstatic Union: Conversion and Ideology in Leaves of Grass*, written by Michael Sowder in 2005, offers a fascinating study on various aspects of Whitman’s religious project in *Leaves of Grass*, including the impact of revivalism on Whitman’s poetics. Herbert J. Levine’s 1987 *MLQ* article “‘Song of Myself’ as Whitman’s American Bible” is also instructive here.

is still true that tradition characterizes the preaching of his country; that it comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul; that it aims at what is usual, and not at what is necessary and eternal; that thus historical Christianity destroys the power of preaching, by withdrawing it from the exploration of the moral nature of man” (Emerson 73).<sup>4</sup> Since the old way of preaching was insufficient, Emerson calls on his audience of divinity students to become “newborn bard[s] of the Holy Ghost” (76). Clearly, both Emerson and Whitman show little faith in the power of traditional preaching, but it would be an oversimplification to say they were dismissive of preaching in general. On the one hand, Whitman and Emerson are denouncing the traditional preacher as an ineffective, even harmful, relic. On the other hand, as we will see, Whitman and Emerson could not have imagined the ideal poet without the towering figure of the preacher.

In his essay “The Poet,” Emerson describes the ideal poet as the great revealer of truths: “so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession” (Emerson 296). This is because he “stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis.” Emerson’s poet “is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals” (299). The effect on the poet’s readers is profound: “We seem to be touched by a wand which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of tropes, fables, oracles and all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods” (300).

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<sup>4</sup> As Floyd Stovall writes in *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass*, Whitman’s own descriptions of Emerson’s influence are ambivalent, and it does seem that Whitman downplayed Emerson’s impact later in life. Nevertheless, in the two writers’ attempts to define poetry, the poet-prophet-priest figure is very prominent.

This description certainly fits contemporary accounts of revivalist preachers, but it also fits Emerson's own description of a popular preacher in New England: Father Edward Taylor. Edward Thompson Taylor was an exceptionally popular preacher in Boston, especially known for his ministry at the Seamen's Bethel for three decades, from the 1830s to the 1850s.<sup>5</sup> He was the rare figure who inspired revivalist preachers, Unitarians, and Transcendentalists alike. Not only did he frequently converse with Margaret Fuller, William Ellery Channing, and Bronson Alcott, but he also served as the figure for Herman Melville's Father Mapple in *Moby Dick*. Charles Dickens visited the Seamen's Bethel and came away very impressed with Taylor. But for our purposes, Taylor was an important figure for Emerson and Whitman as they tried to formulate just what they were looking for in the new American poet.

Emerson described Taylor as "mighty Nature's child, another Robert Burns, trusting entirely to her power, as he has never been deceived by it, and arriving unexpectedly every moment at new and happiest deliverances" ("Father Taylor" 178). Here is a real-life version of Emerson's poet, "who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole—re-attaching even artificial things and violation of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight" (Emerson 295). Emerson goes on to call Taylor "a work, a man, not to be predicted, his vision poetic and pathetic, sight of love unequalled" (179). The power he holds over his audiences is evidence of "the Divine cunning, suggesting the wealth of Nature." As we will see in the coming chapters, the power held by Emerson's poet is

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Knickerbocker's 2014 biography of Taylor, *Bard of the Bethel: The Life and Times of Boston's Father Taylor, 1793-1871*, offers a much-needed updating of Taylor's life and influence in nineteenth-century New England history.

most analogous to the divine power of the preacher, a power Emerson clearly thought Father Taylor wielded in the pulpit.

According to Whitman, he saw Father Taylor preach on multiple occasions “[d]uring my visits to ‘the Hub,’ in 1859 and ‘60” (Whitman 1167). In his essay on Taylor in *November Boughs*, Whitman similarly describes the power of Taylor’s oratory, which “seiz’d you with a power before unknown. Everybody felt this marvelous and awful influence. One young sailor...told me, ‘that must be the Holy Ghost we read of in the Testament’” (1169). Whitman mostly glosses over the exact content of these sermons, describing instead Taylor’s use of “Biblical and oriental forms. Especially were all allusions to ships and the ocean and sailors’ lives, of unrival’d power and life-likenes” (1168). Whitman appears far less interested in the spiritual content of Taylor’s sermon than his mastery of the oratorical form itself. It is no wonder, then, that Michael Sowder describes Taylor’s oratory as “a model for the kind of poetry Whitman would write” (24). Specifically, Whitman was interested in the preacher’s ability not merely to impact his listeners’ opinions, but to produce “what Lawrence Buell called instant spiritual transformations—or, in other words, *conversions*” (26). What Whitman imported from the realm of oratory was the power of the preacher to induce conversions in their listeners, so that the poet would become a preacher in his own right—his poetry taking the place of both sacred texts and sermonic explications. For both Whitman and Emerson, poetry, rather than sermons, held a unique capacity for converting an audience.

### **Conversion and the Written Word**

Conversion is a central process in the work of many antebellum poets, including those who are mainly seen as secular. For the sake of this study, I will be relying on William James's fundamental definition of religious conversion, which he describes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902): "To say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy" (177). This should not be confused with a mere change of mind, however. It is something more seismic and transformative:

Our ordinary alterations of character, as we pass from one of our aims to another, are not commonly called transformations, because each of them is so rapidly succeeded by another in the reverse direction; but whenever one aim grows so stable as to expel definitively its previous rivals from the individual's life, we tend to speak of the phenomenon, and perhaps to wonder at it as a 'transformation' (175).

What separates religious conversion from other religious experiences is the dramatic shift in an individual's sense of self before and after the event. It is not just one's opinions or vocation that change, but habits of behavior—and, therefore, the primary basis of a person's character—are fundamentally altered.<sup>6</sup> James quotes M. Ratisbonne's post-conversion experience as an example: "I only felt myself changed and believed myself another me; I looked for myself in myself and did not find myself" (201). After the

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<sup>6</sup> James explores the connection between habit and psychology in his essay "Habit," in which he writes, "'Habit [is not] a second nature! Habit is ten times nature,' the Duke of Wellington is said to have exclaimed; and the degree to which this is true no one can probably appreciate as well as one who is a veteran soldier himself. The daily drill and the years of discipline end by fashioning a man completely over again, as to most of the possibilities of his conduct" (15).

moment of conversion, the self that remains often appears a newly zealous stranger whose entire self identity is radically altered.<sup>7</sup>

The conversive moment and the reborn self are the culmination of a longer process. James refers to the “Sick Soul” and the “Divided Self” that need to be healed or unified. As James writes in *Varieties*, the conversion experience is “one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before” (143). Massimo Leone explores this thoroughly in his work *Religious Conversion and Identity* (2004), describing the “destabilization” or “fragmentation of the self” (1) required before a new self can emerge from the conversion. For Lewis Rambo, in *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993), what immediately precedes religious conversion is a moment of crisis: “Two basic types of crisis are important to the conversion process: crises that call into question one’s fundamental orientation to life, and crises that in and of themselves are rather mild but are the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back” (46). In order to encourage or induce religious conversion, preachers and writers therefore need to convince their audience that they are in an unstable stage of existence—either a moment of crisis or a proverbial crossroads where the choice is between the promise of heaven and eternal damnation. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M. H. Abrams describes the “conspicuous Romantic tendency,” a

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<sup>7</sup> It may also be worth mentioning that I have witnessed this myself. For several years, I worked with various churches (after having undergone my own intensely emotional conversion) helping to recruit new converts. Although I later also experienced what James would call a “deconversion,” what I saw during this time was reminiscent of nineteenth-century accounts of revivals, as many acquaintances became tearful, described a “tingling” sensation throughout their bodies, broke out in uncontrollable laughter, and sensed a large weight falling from their shoulders.

reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, to revert “to the stark drama and suprarational mysteries of the Christian story and doctrines and to the violent conflicts and abrupt reversals of the Christian inner life, turning on the extremes of destruction and creation, hell and heaven, exile and reunion, death and rebirth, dejection and joy, paradise lost and paradise regained” (66). American Romanticism had a particularly ambivalent relationship to this dichotomy between eternal life and eternal damnation. On the one hand, the Unitarian tradition that produced Ralph Waldo Emerson largely rejected the concept of eternal damnation. On the other, Emerson himself rejected Unitarianism as “corpse-cold.” As a result, we see a similar ambivalence among Transcendentalist writers, who would appropriate the Christian spiritual drama either structurally (as in the case of Emerson) or literally (as in the case of Jones Very).

One of the most famous American texts that attempted to elicit conversion was neither Unitarian nor Transcendentalist. Jonathan Edwards’s 1741 sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” (which was published with the subtitle “Mr. Edwards’s Sermon On the Danger of the Unconverted”) clearly attempted to steer Edwards’s audience into a state of crisis:

So that thus it is, that natural Men are held in the Hand of God over the Pit of Hell; they have deserved the fiery Pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his Anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the Executions of the fierceness of his Wrath in Hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that Anger, neither is God in the least bound by any Promise to hold ‘em up one moment; the Devil is waiting for them, Hell is gaping for them, the Flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the Fire pent up in their own Hearts is struggling to break out; and they have no Interest in any Mediator, there are no Means within Reach that can be any Security to them. (11-12)

Edwards announces that the “Use” or “Application” of this imagistic explication of the unconverted “natural” man is that it may cause an “*Awakening* the unconverted in this Congregation. This that you have heard is the Case of every one of you that are out of Christ” (12). By publishing this sermon after he delivered it, Edwards extended the audience beyond his own congregation. Edwards was thoroughly aware that religious experience can often be shallow and temporary. In “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” Edwards decries shallow outward piety: “We read in Scripture of many that were greatly affected with things of a religious nature, who are there represented as wholly graceless, and many of them ill men” (Edwards 184-85). What he attempts to effect in his sermon, then, is the destabilization of confidently pious, though unconverted, men and women. His choice to do so imagistically anticipates both the strategies of later revivalist preachers (whose use of imagery would alienate preachers of more traditional denominations) and the aestheticization of traditionally religious media such as conversion narratives.

This relationship between text and conversion was not new in American literature—in Edwards’s time or in Whitman’s. Certainly, the written word served as a space for attempting to convert readers from the earliest times in American history (and before). One popular medium for eliciting conversion was the genre of conversion narratives, which were related in church congregations, and were often published as pamphlets circulated to the general public. In her book-length study *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (1983), Patricia Caldwell notes the “skeletal” structure of the conversion narrative, namely, “the expectable sequence of sin, preparation, and assurance; conviction, compensation, and submission;



fear, sorrow, and faith” (2). In early New England church communities, the conversion narrative accomplished two primary functions: the inward assurance for the converted individual and the outward assurance for the congregation that the speaker truly belonged to the church.

Caldwell also traces significant obstacles faced in the development of this mode of expression. Pilgrims to the New World struggled to define their overall experience throughout the seventeenth century, and a practice aimed to devote and evoke assurance predictably proved rather rocky in the face of uncertainty. Nevertheless, these narratives evolved into their own aesthetic form:

We have been assuming all along that the conversion narrative, although certainly not an example of high literary art, can be treated as an artistic form—essentially, a story people tell about themselves... To be sure, John Cotton would not have imagined that a problem of art was lurking within his prescription that “in confession of his sinnes (that it may appear to be a penitent confession)” the new church member “declareth also the grace of God to his soule, drawing him out of his sinful estate into fellowship with Christ”; and yet, the basic demand that produced the conversion story in the first place—the demand that the confession “appear to be a penitent” one—inevitably imposed an artistic standard of performance on every narrator. (160)

In order to become a full member of the church, a convert had to employ genre conventions effectively enough to convince listeners that a true conversion had taken place, and this was, at least in part, a question of skill. Already in the 1600s, then, an uncomfortable problem was developing for the Puritans: in the Calvinist tradition, aesthetics could easily slide into idolatry, and yet an aesthetics was developing for the very method of evincing one’s own election and edifying the community of believers. Eventually, this problem would become central to the practice of preaching as well, as preachers in the growing republic eventually needed to employ tropes, anecdotes, and

idiosyncrasies that would set them apart from other preachers competing for new converts. By far, the most successful preachers—in terms of the number of converts and ability to arouse listeners’ emotions to a fever pitch—were preaching at revivals.

### **The Revivalist Preacher**

While a number of skillful preachers in the eighteenth century drew crowds in America, the most revered may have been George Whitefield. Straying from the reserved and intellectual style of traditional pulpit preaching, Whitefield’s colloquial style attracted countless converts in Britain and America. Writing in 1854, Gardiner Spring proclaimed, “Of all men since the days of the Apostles, *George Whitfield* [sic] is the man who gave the pulpit its true power” (30). Spring also relates John Newton’s anecdote regarding the time when Whitefield was “obliged to preach in the streets, [and] he received, in *one week*, not fewer than a *thousand letters* from persons distressed in their consciences by the energy of his preaching” (30). But Springer is ambivalent about the true source of Whitefield’s power: “Human instrumentality was most truly abundantly honored. God himself was there. It was the Spirit of God poured from on high” (31). On the one hand, Springer wants to acknowledge the unique skill of Whitefield’s preaching, but only to a point—he is quick to highlight the supernatural source of Whitefield’s results.

Phillis Wheatley was more direct in her poem “An Elegaic Poem, On the Death of That Celebrated Divine, And Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, The Late Reverend, and Pious George Whitefield”:

We hear no more the music of thy tongue,  
Thy wonted auditories cease to throng.  
Thy lessons in unequal’d accents flow’d!  
While emulation in each bosom glow’d;

Thou didst, in strains of eloquence refin'd,  
Inflame the soul, and captivate the mind.

There is no hesitation here in attributing Whitefield's success to his own abilities. It was Whitefield's "music," "unequal'd accents," and "strains of eloquence" that could "Inflame the soul," which was the essential step in bringing a soul to conversion during a revival. However, at the time of this poem (1770), Whitefield, as a Methodist, was part of a minority. The majority of preachers were Congregationalists, who tended to value the careful rigor of divinity school graduates to explicate Scripture and doctrine for their congregations.

After the American Revolution, the number and demographics of American preachers began to change wildly. Nathan O. Hatch details this shift in *The Democratization of American Christianity*: "The eighteen hundred Christian ministers serving in 1775 swelled to nearly forty thousand by 1845. The number of preachers per capita more than tripled; the colonial legacy of one minister per fifteen hundred inhabitants became one per five hundred" (4). Beyond this explosion in number is a shift in denominational power: "The Congregationalists, which had twice the clergy of any other American church in 1775, could not muster one-tenth the preaching force of the Methodists in 1845" (4). The vocation itself was changing, as well. Where an authoritative preacher like Cotton Mather or Jonathan Edwards had the credentials of a seminary-trained expert, the revival convert—called to preach often on the same day that he was converted—often had little formal training. Subsequently, this boom created an often bitter division between the old-style of preachers who expounded doctrine carefully after years of study and the new batch of less educated revivalist preachers. As Nathan O. Hatch writes, popular Methodist preachers "invit[ed] even the most unlearned and

inexperienced to respond to a call to preach. These initiates were charged to proclaim the gospel anywhere and every day of the week—even to the limit of their physical endurance.” The result was the creation of the “colloquial sermon” that included “daring pulpit storytelling, no-holds-barred appeals, overt humor, strident attack, graphic application, and intimate personal experience” (57). Unsurprisingly, as Russel Hirst explains, there arose “a great upwelling of popular disdain for the college-and-seminary-bred, upper-class, paid clergy (mostly Presbyterian and Congregationalist),” which were described by the new class of preachers as “the ‘man-made, devil-sent, place-hunting gentry’ coming out of ‘eastern man-made manufacturing machines’” (73). In response, the seminary-trained ministers “equally disdained the uneducated ministry... They were impostors, greenhorns, incapable of leading humanity to salvation” (73).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, there was little they could do to stem the tide of popular revivalism and the concomitant emergence of the towering figure who induced mass conversions. Unsurprisingly, while there were “scarcely fifteen thousand Methodists” at the end of the American Revolution, this number swelled to 2.7 million in 1850. This was in no small part a consequence of the “three to four hundred [camp meetings], drawing an attendance reliably estimated at about a million people a year” (Howe 177).<sup>9</sup> As I will show, Romantic poets were drawn to this style of preaching as a welcome departure from the sterile rationalism of Unitarianism. The primitive emotionalism was refreshing, and the inclusive nature of revival meetings seemed more authentic.

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<sup>8</sup> Hirst explores this divide thoroughly in “The Sixth Canon of Sacred Rhetoric: Inspiration in Nineteenth-Century Homiletic Theory,” (1995).

<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Walker Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* for further analysis and context of this rapid growth in church attendance.

Even more than stylistically, preaching to induce conversion was an inherently democratic project: religious conversion was equally necessary to the senator and the dockworker. Hatch traces the populist nature of revivalism in the nineteenth century, arguing, “The rise of evangelical Christianity in the early republic is, in some measure, a story of the success of common people in shaping the culture after their own priorities rather than the priorities outlined by gentlemen such as the framers of the Constitution” (9). At Methodist camp meetings, leaders of the meeting “encouraged uncensored testimonials by persons without respect to age, gender or race” (50). Preachers themselves, Hatch writes, comprised “a remarkable set of popular leaders who proclaimed compelling visions of individual self-respect and collective self-confidence” (56). It is no wonder, then, that American Romantic poets eventually appropriated this figure to speak in their poems.

One of the most successful revivalist preachers was Charles Grandison Finney, whose revivals were famous for their size and duration. In his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835), the skilled preacher makes his craft seem less spiritual and more rhetorical: “a revival is as naturally a result of the use of the appropriate means as a crop is of the use of its appropriate means” (4). That is to say, a revival of religion is not the random miraculous result of God’s design (hence the heading of this lecture, “A Revival is Not a Miracle”), but a result of the gifted preacher employing the right strategies to cause his audience to convert. The strategy, in its broad strokes, is relatively straightforward: “God has found it necessary to take advantage of the excitability there is in mankind, to produce powerful excitements among them, before he can lead them to obey...it is necessary to raise an excitement among them, till the tide rises so high as to

sweep away the opposing obstacles” (1). As Daniel Walker Howe writes, “Finney and his co-workers hoped to transcend the cycle of revivals and declensions, creating a continuous downpour where once there had been but intermittent showers of grace. In their new theology...the evangelists turned themselves into early psychologists of the techniques of persuasion” (171). For Howe, the revivalist preachers were astute psychologists adept at using rhetoric to manipulate their audience. While he may overstate the case here (preachers did not view themselves quite in this manner), Howe is right that revivalists used their understanding of audience effectively to convert their listeners.

The preacher’s power was, for many revival attendees, something of a miracle. For the masses who attended these revivals, the preacher was endowed with supernatural powers—anointed by the Holy Spirit, he had a special glimpse into spiritual truths. As Dawn Coleman writes,

[A]ntebellum Protestants went beyond this traditional respect for ethos and shared the Romantic infatuation with larger-than-life personalities. Most notably, they tended to imagine the most effective preachers as links between the human and the divine, as awesome and often threatening conduits between the visible and invisible worlds. These representations were hypothetical, figurative, and—to an extent that challenges our assumptions about the differences between religious and non-religious experience—dependent on the rhetoric of the sublime. Given that listeners also took real pleasure in hearing a minister’s voice and watching his performing body, we see that the appeal of antebellum preaching was far less intellectual than imaginative and even aesthetic. (528)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dawn Coleman describes this relationship between the preacher and the listener in “The Antebellum American Sermon as Lived Religion,” in Ellison’s *A New History of the American Sermon: The Nineteenth Century*. Here she relies heavily on William Buell Sprague’s nine-volume *Annals of the American Pulpit*, which I will also look at in the course of this chapter.

Descriptions of these preachers' performances bear out this generalization. William Buell Sprague includes one testimony of the Presbyterian preacher Nicholas Murray, in which the writer claims that men "alleged that they staid [sic] away because they could not control their feelings. I heard of one obdurate infidel, who was chained to his seat under one of his sermons,--who whispered to his companion that he would give any thing to be out of that place" (4: 794). Morgan John Rhees's biographer describes the preacher as "becom[ing] absorbed in the subject, until he seemed a mere organ through which some inspiring power was uttering thoughts which had caught their glow in the light of a spiritual existence" (6: 783).

Beyond the apparent conduit between these preachers and God is the frequent emphasis by biographers on the extemporaneous, unscripted, even unlearned style of these supernatural preachers. The theology of these sermons may not have been as careful, but the resulting conversions were frequent and powerful. In a parallel to Whitman's own reaction against traditional verse, contemporary preaching was reacting against the scripted exegeses of learned divines. As mentioned earlier, and as Coleman has argued, however, the sermon itself was being aestheticized. In the descriptions we find of revivalist preachers, the writers "blur the line between the secular and the sacred because they are permeated with the rhetoric of the sublime, which always signifies an experience that stops short of an actual encounter with divinity" (533). I would add that this line between secular and sacred is blurred for other reasons as well. First, not all preachers were judged to be channels of the Holy Spirit—only the successful preachers were. Second, the very words of successful preachers came to hold a spiritual force of their own. For example, Sprague includes a biography of the Presbyterian David Nelson,

in which the writer proclaims, “The sermons that [Nelson] preached in this place, which were written and delivered *memoriter*, and which he usually carried in the crown of his hat, if they could be recovered and published, would form a volume of eccentric, but singularly powerful, sacred eloquence” (683-4). That is to say, the written words authored by this preacher would hold a power similar to sacred scripture. Sprague’s description suggests that the lines of authority between sacred text and human composition were beginning to blur. American Romantic poets dwelled in this shrinking space between sacred and secular.

In *Sartor Resartus*, Thomas Carlyle famously argued that “the Mythos of the Christian Religion looks not in the eighteenth century as it did in the eighth...But what next? Wilt thou help us to embody the divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythos, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live?” (Carlyle 194). As Abrams writes in *Natural Supernaturalism*, this principle was fundamental in British and Continental Romanticism, in which writers “undertook to save the overview of human history and destiny...and the cardinal values of their religious heritage, by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being” (66). In antebellum America, the “new vehicle and vesture” was the democratic, homegrown, revivalist preacher humbling the proud and extolling the downtrodden with spontaneous sermons. Poets saw this “new vehicle and vesture” as inspiring in ways that were sometimes, but not always, traditionally religious.



### Preachers and Poets

Here we have a model for Whitman's poetic persona, especially as it appears in *Leaves of Grass*. In the 1855 edition, Whitman's speaker refers to himself as

Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen—comrade of all who  
shake hands and welcome to drink and meat;  
A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest,  
A novice beginning experient of myriads of seasons,  
Of every hue and trade and rank, of every caste and religion,  
Not merely of the New World but of Africa Europe or Asia  
. . . . a wandering savage,  
A farmer, mechanic, or artist . . . . a gentleman, sailor,  
lover or quaker,  
A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest. (43)

Like the untrained revivalist preachers who called out auditors of all classes and professions, Whitman is leveling the structures of class and capital, affirming his allegiance to “every hue and trade and rank” and “every caste and religion.” This voice is the embodiment (as many have argued) for Emerson's poet, who is “representative,” and “stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth” (Emerson 288). In reminding his readers of their own “wealth,” the poet brings them “liberation,” and “unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene,” all traits of the contemporary revivalist preacher (302). The “new scene” of the revivalist preacher is a submission to the Holy Spirit. Jones Very took this literally as well. In contrast while Emerson and Whitman adopt the tropes of revivalism, they are urging their readers to discover their own authority.

The connection between Whitman's poetry and Emerson's poet is not new. The following study enlarges this connection to argue that Whitman was one of several poets importing sermonic principles into their poetry. In the pages that follow, I explore the relationship between nineteenth-century American poetry and contemporary preaching.

We usually talk about American and British Romanticism in terms of secularizing the sacred, which underscores the unique moves these well studied writers were making, but we will see that these writers were participating in a practice that was much more widespread than is typically described. Furthermore, secularizing the sacred created its own tensions as it recast the relationship between performers and audiences, texts and readers, and highlighted fundamental questions about the role of poetry. What can—and what should—poetry ask its readers to do? How should it change them?

In the first chapter, we will see how Emerson himself set up these tensions in his own poetry. Emerson's poetry, which is often overshadowed by his more popular essays, imported sermonic strategies and called for his readers to become reborn. This is in line with the poetics he outlines in his essay "The Poet," but his tone is also remarkably similar to contemporary revivalist preaching. In light of his career preaching in the Unitarian pulpit, during which he maintained a restrained and academic style in his sermons, this importation of revivalist undertones is especially interesting. There is a significant discrepancy between Emerson's sermons and his poetry, and this chapter attempts to account for this gap by exploring Emerson's relationship to revivalist preaching.

Jones Very, whose poetry I examine in the second chapter, was even more explicit in his calls for conversion. Employing the persona of God himself, Very's sonnets attempt to destabilize the unconverted reader and elicit conversion in a manner similar to that of revivalist preachers. The traditional narrative surrounding Very's work is that these conversive poems emerged during his period of intense religious experience, but as he later calmed into a more respectable itinerant Unitarian minister, his poetry lost

its sense of religious urgency. A close study of his later poetry and unpublished prose shows that Very never really left this revivalist persona behind. Although his sermons show a calm, Unitarian tone, his later poetry still calls for a conversion similar to the kind evoked by revivalist preaching. This continuity suggests that his conversive orientation was not, as is frequently assumed, merely a function of his temporary mania. Rather, while he was seen as mad, he nevertheless integrated the revival impulse throughout his poetic career.

These two chapters raise an important question about the relationship between poetry and religious experience. Why is it that two ministers, with the pulpit at their command, toned down the conversive tactics of their sermons while sermonizing in their poetry and essays about poetry? That is, why impute to the poet what had been imputed to the preacher? One possible answer is that, while the preacher was a towering figure in the American psyche—as a pillar of social life, as an instrument of conversion and as a conduit to the divine—for someone like Emerson, there was a great deal of ambivalence about the pulpit. On the one hand, Unitarian preachers were as “corpse-cold” as Unitarian doctrine itself. On the other hand, revivalist preachers could be like new-born bards of the Holy Ghost, but what they were preaching (orthodox Christianity that assumes the inherent sin of each person) was unsettling. Emerson’s poet, then, is partially a way to appropriate American religiosity for secular, often Transcendentalist, ends. The poet—the revivalist preacher remade in Emerson’s image—becomes a conduit for Transcendentalist values. This raises difficult questions. What exactly is the poet reviving, since Emerson does not believe in supernatural damnation or salvation? What is his poetry promising?

Inherent in this discussion are questions of aesthetics. Nineteenth-century America was a nation where the lines between sacred media and secular aesthetics were increasingly blurred. In my third chapter, I explore the relationship between poetry and popular iconography in the form of the *Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress* and Banvard's *Mississippi Panorama*, traveling exhibits that were wildly successful all along the East Coast. Both Jones Very and Elizabeth Fries Ellet—a forgotten but prolific writer—published ekphrastic poems after seeing the *Pilgrim's Progress* panorama, both of which illustrate the role popular art could play in religious instruction. Banvard's panorama, which was even more successful internationally, served as the inspiration for John Greenleaf Whittier's anti-slavery poem "The Panorama," in which he employs the voice of the prophet to awaken his readers to the evils of passivity in the face of slavery. In all of these ekphrastic moments, we see the intersection of aesthetics and religious experience played out in the public sphere.

My final chapter expands this discussion of the public sphere to poetry included in nineteenth-century periodicals—particularly, journals aimed at either converting their readers to freethought or reacting against these secularizing forces. By looking at contributions to Abner Kneeland's *Boston Investigator*, we see writers appropriating religious tropes and sermonic strategies with the goal of deconverting Christians. At the same time, in Christian journals, poetry was employed to deconstruct the appeal of freethinkers. This dialogue becomes especially interesting in light of Kneeland's trial and subsequent conviction under the 1782 Massachusetts Blasphemy Law, as the arguments between the prosecution and the defense further illustrate the identity crisis of a New England negotiating its rationalist ideals with its Puritan inheritance.

Overall, then, my dissertation explores what happens when the priesthood refuses to die, but is nevertheless in mortal danger. In the work of Emerson, Very, Ellet, and Whittier, religion is aestheticized and urgent questions arise: what is the relationship between the preacher and the poet, the poet and the reader, the reader and the text? What should poetry do? By bringing much-studied and little-studied poets together, I hope to show the widespread impact of religious conversion—and the preaching that sought to bring about conversion—on poetic practice in nineteenth-century America. More broadly, as throngs of Americans responded to preaching by finding that “religious ideas, previously peripheral in [their] consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of [their] energy” (James 177), they also settled into a new personal identity in the midst of a rapidly transforming society. This dissertation explores what role poetry had in that conversive process.

## CHAPTER ONE

### EMERSON'S CONVERSIVE<sup>11</sup> POETICS

In the spring of 1903, William James was asked to give a twenty-minute speech celebrating the centenary of Ralph Waldo Emerson's birth. In typical James fashion, the pragmatist philosopher plunged into Emerson's works. He emerged from his study to write his friend Fanny Morse, "Reading the whole of him over again continuously...has made me feel his real greatness as I never did before" (Richardson 433). Yet, although writers such as George Santayana and Harvey Gates Townsend have argued to the contrary,<sup>12</sup> William James was no transcendentalist, and Emerson was no pragmatist. As Frederic I. Carpenter notes in his essay "William James and Emerson," the passages James marked in his editions of Emerson fell into three categories (as James classified them): those that revealed "Emerson's singularity," those that were "against my philosophy," and those that smacked of "pragmatism" (42). Perhaps it would be simplest to say that James's intellectual relationship to the arch-transcendentalist was as ambivalent as it was personal.<sup>13</sup> As of this year, however, scholars who have tied the work and thought of William James to that of Emerson have focused solely on the latter's essays, rather than his poems. This is a curious omission, and not only because William

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<sup>11</sup> I use the word "Conversive" in the sense that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it: "Having the power or function of conversion." That is, poetics as they depict, and possibly evoke, religious conversion.

<sup>12</sup> Frederic I. Carpenter first outlined this trend in his influential 1939 article "William James and Emerson." More recently, James Bense has criticized this "De-Transcendentalizing Emerson" in his 2006 piece. Both authors discuss James's annotations of Emerson's work at length.

<sup>13</sup> The James family were, of course, friends of the Emersons, and Ralph Waldo Emerson famously gave his blessing on the newly born William (Richardson 153).

James took great pleasure in reading Emerson's poetry throughout his life. More importantly, Emerson's poems cast light on nineteenth-century American religious experiences, especially conversion, phenomena that so fascinated and preoccupied William James. But was religious conversion primarily a trope in Emerson's poetics, or was this a concrete demand being placed on the reader?

Even though James did not make a study of Emerson's poetic works, his description of religious conversion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* offers a powerful lens through which to view Emerson's poetics. This is not surprising. Both writers were steeped in a New England culture with a rich religious heritage of iconic ministers and powerful revivals. As James applies his pragmatic lens to his study of religion, his *Varieties* offers a singularly thoughtful explication of popular religious experience. Emerson, for his part, was groomed from a young age for the New England pulpit, and his participation in the American religious experience informed the foundational principles of his poetics. As we will see, while Emerson the minister appeared to hold the Unitarian skepticism of revivalistic conversion, revivalism largely shaped his poetics.

### **Emerson and Revivalism**

In his work *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Social Change in America, 1607-1977*, William G. McLoughlin argues that the Second Great Awakening lasted from 1800-1830, and the Third Great Awakening lasted from 1890-1920 (10). While squeezing such complex social phenomena as religious awakenings into tight windows of time is problematic, it is safe to say that Ralph Waldo Emerson was born

during a time of profound religious change, and died as the seeds of another awakening were just about to sprout. This milieu, as I will argue, affected not just his theology but also his poetics—that is, the structure and functions of his verse.

Some historians, such as Jon Butler, look skeptically at these revival meetings as mass outpourings of emotion in which attendees were expertly manipulated by astute preachers. In *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, Butler writes with irony, “After all, only the Christian god knew the future and controlled the world, and the minister, trained in Christian doctrine and--in evangelical circles--having undergone a conversion experience himself, was the proper guide to charting the Christian’s future” (92). Indeed, it is not a uniquely twentieth-century bias to look at these awakenings with ambivalence. For his part, William James displayed skepticism in revivalism’s fruits. In his *Varieties*, James writes, “The believers in the non-natural character of sudden conversion have had practically to admit that there is no unmistakable class-mark distinctive of all true converts” (211).<sup>14</sup> Contemporaneous rationalists and Calvinists alike took exception to the whole revivalist project on various grounds—not only were these conversions inextricably linked to emotional appeals, but these revivalist preachers also emphasized the individual will in a way that questioned the doctrine of God’s unconditional election of the saints. McLoughlin, however, urges us to look at this part of our cultural history carefully: “[Awakenings] are not brief outbursts of mass emotionalism by one group or another but profound cultural transformations

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<sup>14</sup> While James found the sudden change fascinating and worthy of study, he nevertheless felt the long-term efficacy was overwrought: “If we roughly arrange human beings in classes, each class standing for a grade of spiritual excellence, I believe we shall find natural [unconverted] men and converts both sudden and gradual in all the classes. The forms which regenerative change effects have, then, no general spiritual significance, but only a psychological significance” (213).



affecting all Americans and extending over a generation or more” (2). Even more importantly, these times of revival constitute “the awakening of a people caught in an outmoded, dysfunctional world view to the necessity of converting their mindset, their behavior, and their institutions to more relevant or more functionally useful ways of understanding and coping with the changes in the world they live in” (8). Taken out of context, McLoughlin’s comment could have been about Transcendentalism.<sup>15</sup> This similarity between revivalism and Transcendentalist spirituality highlights one reason that someone like Emerson would have become drawn to the power of revivalist preachers in spite of his training for the Unitarian ministry.

Writing in 1832, the Reverend Calvin Colton noted that this separation of “awakenings” was never tidy: “It is not true, as already recognized, that revivals have totally ceased at any time, since their first appearance in our country” (*History and Character of American Revivals of Religion* 56). More specifically, he describes the state of revivals in the early nineteenth century: “The last fifteen years, in parts of the United States, especially in the east and north, have been an almost uninterrupted scene of extensive and powerful revivals” (62). Indeed, already by 1821, revivals such as the one in which Charles Grandison Finney was converted were drawing in upwards of a

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<sup>15</sup> Frederick C. Dahlstrand aptly describes the shifting world around Transcendentalism in his essay “Science, Religion, and the Transcendentalist Response to a Changing America”: “Far from questioning the importance of science or blithely ignoring its repercussions, they used science to challenge their own faith and that of their generation. They explored the parameters of scientific inquiry and posed searching questions for scientists, theologians, and philosophers of science. The whole movement prefigured modernist theology by attempting, though hesitantly and with reservations, to adapt religious ideas to modern culture, by portraying a God who was immanent in human cultural development, and by asserting a belief in the progressive nature of human society” (21).

thousand people at a time (Hankins 43). In his autobiography, Finney describes his conversion after attending a revival in the fall of 1821:

I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed like the very breath of God. I can recollect distinctly that it seemed to fan me, like immense wings. No words can express the wonderful love that was shed abroad in my heart. I wept aloud with joy and love; and I do not know but I should say, I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until I recollect I cried out, 'I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me.' I said, 'Lord, I cannot bear any more;' yet I had no fear of death" (4).

If we compare this with William James's observations about sudden conversion, we see that Finney's description fits the pattern already established. Namely, the individual becomes overwhelmed with religious feelings that create both an inexpressible emotion and a definitive moment that drastically change the trajectory of the individual's spiritual development.

Ordained in 1829, Emerson became a pastor just as Charles Grandison Finney was holding his widely reported (and well attended) revivals. The denomination into which he was ordained, however, did not generally respect revivalism. Religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom writes, "Counteractive forces tempered American Unitarianism with the result that the prophetic motives of the Puritan legacy were never abandoned...[but]...The success of Edwards's attempt to create a philosophical faith tended ironically not only to strengthen rationalism but also to create a revulsion for Calvinism. Revivalistic excesses only heightened the revulsion" (*An American Reformation* 21). One example of Emerson's reluctant acknowledgment of revivalism's power comes in his 111<sup>th</sup> Sermon:

However alien from your habits the exterior of them may be, the principles on which Revivals are sought for are perfectly sound. My only want of sympathy with them is that in their history, the reason of man has

not been addressed. Such representations of God have been made as keep down & hurt the mind & do not exalt it. Such representations of God as could be received only by feeble & slothful minds but must forever keep aloof from the assembly an enlarged intellect. Among that portion of the community whose frame of mind makes them more open to this influence than to any other, why should not these seasons of excitement have the happiest effect? (3: 326)

In this sermon, we see Emerson's hesitance to celebrate the revivalist's depiction of God as leaving behind "the reason of man." Although the particular content of revivalist religion "could be received only by feeble & slothful minds," there is something compelling about the power of a revivalist preacher. For McLoughlin, "It is the role of the revivalist, the prophet of revitalization, to sustain the reality of the culture myths, to reinterpret them to meet the needs of social change, and to clothe them with an aura of reality that grows from his own conviction that he is a messenger of God" (McLoughlin 104). Although Emerson was not a revivalist preacher himself, these awakenings were widely publicized throughout the United States at the time. While, as a Unitarian, he did not resort to excessive appeals to emotion, he nevertheless admired their force, and, as we will see, attempted to harness this force in his poetry.

One complication of Emerson's relationship with revivalism is the common tactic of revivalist preachers to convict their listeners of their own sin and persuade them of the subsequent need for salvation. While Emerson is not typically associated with traditional notions of sin and depravity,<sup>16</sup> these are themes that appear in his sermons at the Second

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<sup>16</sup> In his lecture on "The Divided Self," for example, William James appears to categorize Emerson as one who does not need to be reborn: "Some persons are born with an inner constitution which is harmonious and well balanced from the outset. Their impulses are consistent with one another, their will follows without trouble the guidance of their intellect, their passions are not excessive, and their lives are little haunted by regrets" (152). As Roberson's study *Emerson in His Sermons* shows, this is a gross oversimplification of Emerson's life and thought.

Church. Susan Roberson correctly describes these themes in her thorough examination of Emerson's sermons, *Emerson in His Sermons*: "Unknown to most readers of his later essays who, like [William] James, find a 'strangely limited' sense of wrong, there is an Emerson who lurks in the dimness of forgotten sermons, not daring to wander into the savage silence of the forest, afraid of the unrestrained passion and of facing the 'bosom sin' that he knew to reside in each person" (25). Like Hawthorne, Roberson argues, Emerson believed in the "innate weakness of the human will" as well as "the grim consequences of sin, that its mark was a brand not only on the heart but also on the character, searing and disfiguring it" (25). Such a conception of sin requires a salvific process in which the sinner becomes ennobled through transformation (or metamorphosis). In Sermon 43, Emerson locates this salvation in a proper relationship with God:

It seems to me the whole difference between a religious & an irreligious man, the index by which every man's progress in goodness is marked--common to all sects & utterly regardless of their demarcations, is, their perception of God. All practical religion is the perception of God, for the more distinctly the mind beholds him, the more faithfully will it adopt his will & execute his commands. (2:20)

In Sermon 111, he states the need for this simply: "Let the doctrine be simply stated that we must be born again, & all will admit it." So, even as he fell away from church doctrines, he remained fascinated by the revivifying metaphor of conversion.

Although Rationalist Unitarians may have been skeptical of the emotionalism in revivalistic conversions, Emerson was no orthodox Unitarian (he later famously described Unitarianism as "corpse-cold"). Conversion was a theme in multiple sermons even during his time as pastor of the Second Church. For Emerson, conversion is

metamorphosis, an ongoing process modeled on what we see in nature. In Sermon 43, Emerson mentions revivalism:

And as the religious character is a development of the human mind, & not the fruit of external doctrines, it is not the particular speculations we run into about Gods /one/simple/ or twofold or threefold nature or about the preexistence of the Saviour or about atonement & justification & <revivals> +conversion<sup>17</sup>, it is not these that make the difference between men,--but something prior to all these & independent of all, namely the relation which the soul bears to God,--a relation of the faculties & the affections, & so, of all the actions,--a relation so holy & natural & rapid that the poor fences of human sects are no barrier to it; are indifferent to it. (2:20)

In Emerson's sermons, "conversion" usually carries one of two meanings. The first is the means by which a believer returns to the innocence of childhood and becomes a virtuous Christian. In Sermon 72, Emerson asks, "But how shall we be converted, & regain this simplicity? It seems to me, my friends, that this is the lesson which God teaches us by all the discipline of this life...God commands us to return by our own <voluntary> exertions to the same habits of action. But it will not be innocence, it will be something far more glorious, it will be virtue" (2:174). The tone of this sermon is that of orthodox rationalism, informed by Scottish Common Sense and Stoic philosophy. Rather than an emphasis on spiritual rebirth, this sermon depicts the goal of Christian spirituality to be Christian virtue and equanimity.

In other sermons, however, Emerson uses conversion to signify a process that mirrors nature. For example, in Sermon 39, Emerson offers a characteristically naturalistic illustration of spiritual metamorphosis: "There is no tale of metamorphosis in poetry, no fabulous transformation that children read in the Arabian tales more unaccountable, none so benevolent as this constant natural process which is going on at

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<sup>17</sup> Textual notations are present in Albert J. Von Frank's edition of Emerson's sermons.

this moment in every garden, in every foot of vacant land in three zones of the globe” (1:298). In Sermon 156, he describes a process through which a person or idea becomes a completely new being: “Christianity taught the divine secret of converting all the happiness I witness into my happiness” (4:151). In Sermon 161, Emerson describes “the primal curse” being “converted into the fulness of blessing” through God’s work (4:184). Emerson also uses the word “transformation” to signify this process: “In the decay of nature it [the gospel] comes to man in his last hour & strangely transforms the signs of suffering to symbols of joy” (1:247). Of course, these two conceptions of conversion (or transformation) are interrelated. In Sermon 63, Emerson describes the process:

But he who lives only for the improvement of his character, only to acquire more knowledge, & to become more useful who acknowledges God’s sovereign right in him & would gladly be transformed from temporal desires & renewed in the image of eternal good—he who thus lives has no enemy & fears no change for every event contributes to his good, & loss of wealth, or of health, or of human favor, or of the death of friends, or his own death—none of these things move him, for, none can rob him of what is his precious property his entire trust in God & his unceasing endeavors to make himself better or in the language of the apostle transform himself into his glorious likeness. (2:128)

If the goal is to be transformed, it is the minister’s role to edify and encourage the believer through the process of becoming habituated to virtuous living. Emerson’s ideal preacher is more of a mentor, teacher, and counselor than a prophet. The sermon is not the place for bringing about spiritual awakening, but a chance for the preacher to offer practical advice about Christian living. This is a far cry from Charles Grandison Finney’s conception of the revivalist preacher. One of the most successful revivalist preachers in American history, Finney wrote that the preacher needed to “awaken men to a sense of guilt and danger, and thus produce an excitement of counter feeling and desire which will break the power of carnal and worldly desire and leave the will free to obey God”

(*Lectures on Revivals* 1). William James would later see this as a key component in the conversion of a revival attendee: In his lecture on conversion, he writes, “Emotional occasions, especially violent ones, are extremely potent in precipitating mental rearrangements...Hope, happiness, security, resolve, emotions characteristic of conversion, can be...explosive. And emotions that come in this explosive way seldom leave things as they found them” (178).<sup>18</sup> This is not the style of preaching Emerson practiced in his own pulpit.

Emerson was also skeptical of parishioners’ tendencies to “exaggerate the merits of [their] peculiar teacher” (1:225). He offers a detailed description of his vision for his own preaching in his 28<sup>th</sup> sermon:

But if I can add any distinctness to your idea of God, any beauty to your notion of virtue; if I can represent the life of Christ in such vivid & true colours as to exalt your love; if I can persuade one young man to check the running tide of sensual pleasure by the force of moral obligation; if I can prevail with one old man to forgive an injury that has rankled in his breast till hatred has grown into habit, out of regard to the example of Jesus & his law of love; if I can arrest one angry sarcasm of wounded pride in the moment of irritation, one syllable of slander as it trembles on the tongue, by the memory of the motives I have called to your aid; if a sermon of mine shall be remembered as a solace in the chamber of sorrow, if when the eye of one of you is closing forever on this world, your spirit, as it passes, shall thank me for one triumphant hope,--then, my brethren, it is praise enough; then I shall bless God that I have not been wholly wanting to his cause, that, by me, one mite is added to the sum of happiness.<sup>19</sup>  
(1:237)

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<sup>18</sup> This power, for James, was powerful enough to bring the subconscious, or subliminal, self to the surface, which was arguably one of the primary shifts that took place during the process of conversion (James 178).

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Emerson contrasts himself with Finney in a journal entry from 30 January, 1832: “Thus Finney can preach, & his prayers are short. Parkman can pray, & so his prayers are long. Lowell can visit & so his church service is less. But what shall poor I do who can neither visit nor pray nor preach to my mind?”

So, if we look at Emerson's preaching, and his conception of his role as a minister, we see a rather typical example of the differences between revivalistic preaching and Unitarianism. While Unitarian rhetoricians acknowledged the importance of arousing emotions through art and preaching, this emotion needed to be carefully cultivated. As Daniel Walker Howe writes in *The Unitarian Conscience*, "As long as the emotions awakened by literature were carefully contrived...they could 'work safely' under rational control, without usurping supremacy and becoming 'turbulent masters'...Unitarian sentimentalism always remained subordinate to a rational and moral end. In this respect, Harvard moralists retained their faith in an ordered and hierarchical cosmos" (197). Emerson's Unitarian training left him comparatively dubious of revivalistic fervor. It is not until we look at Emerson's conception of the poet that we see Emerson reimagining the revivalist spirit that was in the air, and applying the principles of conversion to his teleology of poetry.

### **Emerson's Revivalist Poet**

Emerson's 1844 essay "The Poet" is one of his most deliberate attempts to define the nature of poetry and the role of the poet. According to biographer Robert D. Richardson, Jr., Emerson's efforts resulted in, arguably, "the best piece ever written on literature as literary process, and it is the major statement of international romantic expressionism" (371). However we rank the essay among other discussions of literature, the essay surely ranks as Emerson's greatest attempt at defining his art. Furthermore, as R. A. Yoder observes, "in 'The Poet' Emerson defined the truth of poetry as a process of metamorphosis" (9). Yoder is right to notice that significant change is a crucial element



of Emerson's poetics. However, conversion—spiritual rebirth—serves as a more appropriate metaphor for Emerson's conception of the role of the poet. As we will see, Emerson not only developed this conversive principle in his prose, but he also evinced it in his poetry.

Emerson opens "The Poet" with a fourteen-line poem—the first ten lines in couplets of varying length, and the last quartet in iambic trimeter. This brief poem is an apt prologue to "The Poet," as the speaker describes a "moody" child observing his surroundings with an ever-expanding perspective. The "wildly wise" child cannot control his eyes, which "like meteors" shoot through the sky:

They overleapt the horizon's edge,  
Searched with Apollo's privilege;  
Through man, and woman, and sea, and star,  
Saw the dance of nature forward far;  
Through worlds, and races, and terms, and times,  
Saw musical order, and pairing rhymes (ll.5-10).

As the child's perspective expands, so do the lines. Although the first four lines of Emerson's poem have eight syllables, the lines here expand to nine syllables, as the child takes in more of the universe, and subsequently imposes order on what he sees. Contrary to the "corpse-cold" Unitarianism Emerson left behind, this conversive process is not one of rational discourse among older men. Instead, Emerson takes us into increasingly astronomical, and abstract, observations until, finally, a child organizes what he sees into "musical order, and pairing rhymes." As William James writes, "Conversion is in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity" (179). In this sense, the lines of "The Poet" mark the passage of Emerson's child subject from the myopic worldview of the child to the expanded vision of the convert. Reflecting on the

transformative nature of this child's experience, the closing four lines (back to controlled, iambic trimeter) explain that it is the power of "Olympian bards" to "always keep us" young. In this opening poem, then, Emerson has already intimated one of the higher purposes of poetry, namely, one that expands and reforms the imagination. Of course, the spiritual importance of poetry was not new in America at this time. As Lawrence I. Buell writes, "never before or since in American history had there been such faith in the spiritual significance of poetry" (Buell 3). Furthermore, New England already had a tradition of meditative poetry, although Emerson's spirituality, by this point in his life, is not the spirituality of the New England Unitarians. Rather, this is spiritual rebirth as a result of a child-like encounter with the poetic text—that is, a poem written by the type of poet Emerson came to envision. Here, Emerson's poem depicts conversion from the perspective of the reader, for whom the poem acts as a cause of conversion. In other poems, as I will show, Emerson will focus on the poet's own perspective as an agent of conversion.

For Emerson, the ideal poet has an important social function. Emerson's poet is "representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth" (162). He is "the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience" (163). He is at once artist and priest, a creative and virtuous saint: "The sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body" (175). Even more, he is a prophet who "announces that which no man foretold" (165). The poet has a unique vantage point: "he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of

every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature” (170). As Emerson elaborates in his journal, “[as Muskau says] Great poets work like Nature herself...They are so rich that they distribute their gifts among a thousand poor & yet have abundance in reserve” (V.119). The poet operates as Nature does, and “Metamorphosis is nature” (VII.428). So, it is logical that, when the poet plies his trade, the result has a great effect on his readers: “We seem to be touched by a wand, which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect of...all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods” (175)<sup>20</sup>. Keeping in mind Emerson’s imagery of nature “baptiz[ing] herself” (171), we have a reimagining of the evangelical revival, with the poet in the pulpit, rather than the preacher, and the readers dancing in the aisles as a result of poetics, rather than sermonic exhortation.

Emerson expects the poet to have the unique capacity to bring about spiritual rebirth in his readers. This is one reason for the disappointment many readers have expressed after reading Emerson’s poetic endeavors. Matthew Arnold wrote, “in truth, one of the legitimate poets, Emerson in my opinion, is not. His poetry is interesting, it makes one think; but it is not the poetry of one of the born poets” (356). A number of critics followed Matthew Arnold in arguing that Emerson was not truly a great poet, although the work of Yoder, Waggoner, and Strauch helped encourage critics to reconsider Emerson’s merits as a poet. Still, some critics continue to follow David Porter

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<sup>20</sup> Although there is no direct evidence that Emerson read Percy Bysshe Shelley’s prose (though he did read his poetry), the Shelleyan echoes from the *Defense of Poetry* are quite prevalent in “The Poet”.

in seeing Emerson as a significant thinker whose poetry paled in comparison to that of Whitman and Dickinson. Rather, Porter argues that Emerson was a common popular poet: “Emerson joined other American poets in reinforcing the audience’s ideas and playing to their expectations” (15). Michael Cowan writes, “In his actual poetic process, Emerson was often more successful at talking about metamorphosis in nature and thought than he was at demonstrating its workings” (“The Loving Proteus” 14).

A number of contemporary reviewers echo this conception of Emerson’s poetic abilities. In his sketch of Emerson, George E. Bungay writes in 1852 that Emerson “is a poetical as well as a prose writer, but there is more poetry in his prose than in his poems” (Cameron 71).<sup>21</sup> An 1855 reviewer for *Harvard Magazine* (who signed the article as “N.”) is more ambivalent: “While he has passages, indeed whole pieces, which are as faultless, flawless, and beautiful as some costly gem, he has others which, to the understanding of the uninitiated reader at least, appear to be mere unmeaning strings of words, vague, hyper-metaphysical formulas, and pure balderdash” (Cameron 90). Addressing “The Sphinx” in particular, one unnamed reviewer for the *Southern & Western Literary Messenger & Review* writes on May 1, 1847, “But it is only in prose that Mr. Emerson is a poet; this volume of professed poetry [*Poems* (1847)] contains the most prosaic and unintelligible stuff that it has ever been our fortune to encounter. The book opens, very appropriately, with a piece called *The Sphinx*. We are no Oedipus, and cannot expound one of the riddles contained in it” (“Nine New Poets” 294). It is

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Walter Cameron’s 1967 collection of reviews from the U.S. and Great Britain, *Emerson Among His Contemporaries: A Harvest of Estimates, Insights, And Anecdotes From The Victorian World*, contains numerous similar essays and reviews. The ones cited in this chapter are intended to be representative.

understandable, then, that subsequent literary critics have viewed Emerson's poetic output as a failure to live up to Emerson's own expectations of poetry.

Not all of Emerson's contemporaries viewed his poetry in a negative light, however. One unnamed reviewer writing for *The Literary World* in April of 1847 describes an apparent change in attitude toward the Transcendentalist poet: "We think we discern in the somewhat eager and earnest laudation of this poem in quarters heretofore cold and distrustful toward the compositions of this and other writers of a kindred spirit, a consciousness that their past idols are not sufficient for them" (Cameron 5). Rather, these lesser poets appear now as "dry sticks on the altar, whom their most fervent prayer and adorations could not prevail upon for a moment to kindle with fire from heaven." In Emerson, these readers think they have "suddenly discovered a poetical Elijah, and the eastern reviews and journals are accordingly in a blaze, in strange contrast with the frozen silence of the past" (5). Although the metaphor is slightly murky, this reviewer interestingly associates Emerson with the powerful prophet, able to call down fire from heaven. N. Parker Willis uses another, perhaps clearer metaphor by saying of Emerson, "He has climbed above the atmosphere of this world and kicked away the ladder" (Cameron 69). While the poet may have left some readers behind, Thomas Powell, reviewing Emerson's work in 1850, argues that this is not a reason to criticize Emerson. Rather, Powell writes, "casual readers [seldom] pause long enough over poetry to find out all its meaning; but the meaning and the power are there, and the reader, not the poet, is deficient" (Cameron 31). In the pages that follow, we will escape this shortcoming, instead "paus[ing] long enough over" Emerson's poetry to explore the conversive workings of his poems. As we will see, in his Sphinx and Merlin poems, Emerson

demonstrated the workings of rebirth, a conception that extends beyond the natural metamorphosis described by Michael Cowan. Furthermore, in poem after poem, Emerson uses rebirth as a device to illustrate the fundamentally conversive nature of poetics.

### **Egyptomania and the Poet's Liberating Power**

Since Emerson placed “The Sphinx” at the beginning of multiple editions of his poetry (which, for Sandra Morris, indicates the poem’s status as a “Threshold Poem”), let us begin our reading of the poems here. “The Sphinx” allows Emerson to reimagine a Greco-Egyptian instance of metamorphosis instigated by the spoken words of a wise man. Paul Johnson writes that classical depictions of the Sphinx’s encounter with Oedipus “still retained real details from the ancient Egyptian religious beliefs about sphinxes, indeed about the Great Sphinx of Giza itself” (*Riddles of the Sphinx* 206). For Sophocles—as for other ancient sources such as Hesiod, Pseudo-Apollodorus, and Statius—Oedipus was first and foremost a king. Emerson’s first alteration of the tale, then, is the shift of power from the monarch to the bard.

In his influential work *American Hieroglyphics*, John T. Irwin writes, “That Europe and America, during the period 1800-50, were swept by a wave of interest in the antiquities of Egypt is nowadays one of the less well remembered facets of nineteenth-century history” (3). Since 1971, this has become better remembered with multiple works discussing “Egyptomania” in the nineteenth century. This craze had concrete influences, with Egyptian themes appearing in popular culture, architecture such as the Washington Monument, and even churches. Lynn Parramore describes this trend in

*Reading the Sphinx*: “English, American, and Australian houses of worship—from Methodist churches to Jewish synagogues—displayed Egyptian decorations” (36). This includes the Downtown Presbyterian Church of Richmond, VA (36). Scott Trafton also notes that “Egypt and America sit side by side in the main reading room mural of the Library of Congress” (*Egypt Land 2*). With this in mind, it is unsurprising that Egyptian themes appear in numerous essays and poems by Emerson.

“The Sphinx” contains sixteen eight-line stanzas in iambic dimeter, closing with a quatrain. While the Sphinx was usually portrayed as the ever-alert guardian of Thebes, “vetting travellers on the road to that city,” (Johnson 207) Emerson’s Sphinx appears more sedentary. The speaker opens with a description of the Sphinx as “drowsy,” wings “furled,” ear “heavy.” These descriptors connote weariness and unused potential. Although the Sphinx claims to have “awaited the seer,/ While they slumbered and slept” she is herself on the precipice of becoming one of the sleepers.

Nevertheless, she proceeds with her riddle, presumably directed at the Poet described by the speaker. Contrary to the traditional riddle associated with the Sphinx, Emerson’s creature offers the Poet a Transcendental riddle characterized by rebirth and metamorphosis. Sandra Morris writes, “The most immediate effect of Emerson’s ‘The Sphinx’ is to baffle” (550). The Sphinx’s riddle is intensely paradoxical, but not impenetrable. The first clue to this riddle is the coupling of opposing pairs inherent throughout: man-child/man, known/unknown, sleeping/waking, waking/sleep, and life/death. Several of these couplings reflect Emerson’s sense of metamorphosis. “Known fruit” comes out of “the unknown”; “a waking” arises out of “sleeping:” “a sleep” arises out of “waking.” These pairs of opposites display how each object or act

depends on--is contained in--its opposite. The imagery here reflects Emerson's notion of all natural objects "passing into something else, streaming into something higher" ("Poetry and Imagination" 1). The poet responds by reinforcing the interdependence inherent in the natural world (and, subsequently, the self): "Eterne alternation/ Now follows, now flies; / And under pain, pleasure--/ Under pleasure, pain lies" (ll.97-100). Having understood the Sphinx's question, the poet displays enough confidence to tease the "Dull Sphinx," calling for "Rue, myrrh, and cummin for the Sphinx--/Her muddy eyes to clear!" (ll.107-108). Clearly, for the poet, the Sphinx has let herself go. No longer the piercing, otherworldly monster, she is blinded by the earth to which she has been bound.

In traditional narratives of the scene, the Sphinx does not survive her encounter with Oedipus. While Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* alludes to the episode after the fact, Pseudo-Apollodorus and Statius offer us more direct descriptions from the ancient world. Pseudo-Apollodorus writes in the second century, AD,

On hearing [the riddle], Oedipus found the solution, declaring that the riddle of the Sphinx referred to man; for as a babe he is four-footed, going on four limbs, as an adult he is two-footed, and as an old man he gets besides a third support in a staff. So the Sphinx threw herself from the citadel, and Oedipus both succeeded to the kingdom and unwittingly married his mother. (*The Library* 3.5.8)

In Apollodorus' account, her riddle now solved, the defeated Sphinx committed suicide. The description of the suicide is rather vague, though. Statius (writing in the first century AD) is more specific:

Her tricks she kept secret till, down from her blood-caked ledge  
--oh!--caught out by the man who matched her, on failing wings,  
wailing, she smashed her insatiate belly on rocks below.  
The forest has not forgotten the crime: cattle will not  
graze near by, and hungry flocks shun its tainted grass.



(*Thebiad* II.516-520)

In Statius' account, we have a violent suicide caused by despair at having been bested by a man. The result of the suicide is ruinous for the natural world, poisoning the ground for all time.

Emerson's poem portrays the person of the Sphinx more positively, as a guardian eagerly awaiting a genius to set her free (rather than a violent, poisonous monster).<sup>22</sup> But the starkest contrast is in the result of this interaction—specifically, Emerson substitutes metamorphosis for suicide. It is when he finally names the Sphinx that she undergoes her startling transformation:

Uprose the merry Sphinx,  
And crouched no more in stone;  
She melted into purple cloud,  
She silvered in the moon;  
She spired into a yellow flame;  
She flowered in blossoms red;  
She flowed into a foaming wave;  
She stood Monadnoc's head. (ll.121-128)

Rather than being defeated, Emerson's Sphinx is freed. There is no suicide, only transformation—one that is startlingly visual. The intensely visual imagery is pervasive in this conversive moment: the light of the moon, the "yellow flame," the "blossoms red." As William James notes, this is common to the conversion experience: "I refer to hallucinatory or pseudo-hallucinatory luminous phenomena, *photisms*, to use the term of the psychologists. Saint Paul's blinding heavenly vision seems to have been a

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<sup>22</sup> David L. Smith reads the Sphinx more allegorically in his essay "The Sphinx Must Solve Her Own Riddle": "The Sphinx is the human energy of inquiry that impels our quests through nature and which stands, in its indissoluble unity with things, as the answer to the quests themselves" (854). Smith is right that Emerson's Sphinx is certainly different from the traditional monster, but given the dependency of the Sphinx on the poet's liberating words, the Sphinx appears less generative and more symbiotic in relation to the poet.

phenomenon of this sort; so does Constantine's cross in the sky" (223).<sup>23</sup> In this stanza, a succession of metamorphoses precipitate the poet's naming. The verbs used to describe the Sphinx's transformation recall conversion narratives up through Emerson's time: Uprose, [no more] crouched, melted, silvered, spired, flowered, flowed. In Emerson's own "Ode to Beauty," the verb "melt" is associated with rebirth: "New-born, we are melting/ Into nature again" (ll.19-20). Indeed, the Sphinx seems to have finally been transformed, literally melting in to nature.

Significantly, it is through the power of the poet's words that this comes about—he is, indeed, one of the "liberating gods" Emerson describes in "The Poet." This is a very literal application of Emerson's remark in his 1836 essay "Nature": "The transfiguration which all material objects undergo through the passion of the poet--this power which he exerts to dwarf the great, to magnify the small" (27-28). In his manuscript poem "There is in all the sons of men," Emerson's speaker offers a more precise description of the relationship between the ideal poet and the poet's audience: "They seek a friend to speak the word/ Already trembling on their tongue/ To touch with prophet's hand the Chord/ Which God in human hearts hath strung" (ll.13-16). Through the poet's power of saying, then, the dormant chord in the Sphinx has been touched, liberating the drowsy creature from her stupor and causing her to undergo a celestial metamorphosis. As he writes in "The Poet," "The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men. We seem to be touched by a wand, which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air...Poets are thus liberating gods" (175). In this sense,

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<sup>23</sup> James also traces it in more contemporaneous narratives, including that of Charles Grandison Finney (223).

the poet in “The Sphinx” is not merely the one who knows the riddle’s answer, but the “liberating god” whose very words trigger spiritual rebirth.

Given Trafton’s discussion of the American desire for Egypt’s stature as a great civilization, it is significant that the Sphinx ends her process of release in a New England mountain range. In this way, Emerson has completed his American, Transcendental appropriation of a classical myth. The Oedipal encounter with the Sphinx now signifies the American Poet’s perceptive wisdom and uniquely transformative power to elicit rebirth through his poetry. Specifically, this rebirth has all of the characteristics of religious conversion as it was experienced in American revivalism.

### **Merlin, Bard of Conversive Poetics**

For Emerson, the poet who can elicit spiritual rebirth is a prophet-priest who has yet to come: “For, the experience of each age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet” (Emerson 165). As of 1844, Emerson laments that “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe” (179). This does not keep Emerson from describing the ideal poet in his essays and depicting him in verse. But since Emerson could not find an ideal poet among his contemporaries, he created (or recreated, as it were) his own exemplar: Merlin. Nelson F. Adkins writes in his seminal “Emerson and the Bardic Tradition,” that in “‘Merlin’ [Emerson] turned back, for the embodiment of the ideal poet, to the ancient bard” (662).

Emerson’s choice of Merlin as the ideal poet proves apt for two reasons. First, he possesses the vast array of talents and skills that he requires in the Poet. In *Emerson and Literary Change*, David Porter writes, “Among Emerson’s constructs of the poetic

imagination, the central one is Merlin. All those dissociated voices speaking out of his poems are versions of that central poet” (90). As we will see, Merlin enacts the principles that Emerson lays out in his essays on poetry. The second reason that Merlin is an apt choice is that Merlin (especially as conceived by Emerson) was both Christian and pagan. That is, as Monika Elbert points out, Emerson conflates the bardic poet Myrrdin with the Merlin who evolved from the Celtic warrior and pagan prophet-magician to the “divine machinery” of a Christian King (Walton 49). This is the perfect marriage of pagan, Christian, and bardic,<sup>24</sup> a syncretism Emerson employed throughout his writings.

Although a number of critics have explored the implications of Emerson’s Merlin, they have failed to connect the figure of Merlin with the revivalist undertones in Emerson’s Merlin poems. Stephen Knight writes in *Merlin: Knowledge and Power Through the Ages* that Emerson “made Merlin a sage artist-educator, a new kind of poetic knowledge for the power of American self-confidence” (17). While this is true, it is not all that Emerson is doing with Merlin. Monika Elbert goes further when she explores an anthropological reason for Emerson’s choice of Merlin: “Norma Lorre Goodrich cites the anthropologist Malinowski’s essay ‘Myths of Magic’ to show how the mythological Merlin is evoked when ‘society needs an organizer’ and when ‘people long for some token of success, some power man...to inspire them with belief in their own powers’” (116). Elbert thus concludes that Emerson employed Merlin in order to “universalize

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<sup>24</sup> Numerous critics, such as Adkins and Kenneth Walter Cameron, discuss Emerson’s appropriation of Merlin. These critics have carefully, and successfully, traced the origins of Emerson’s fascination with the bard and the sources of his knowledge of Merlin’s story. My purpose is not to offer insight into the Merlin genealogy, but to see how Emerson used Merlin to employ his conversive poetics.

genius and to aristocratize the mind” (116). But this is too abstract for what Emerson is actually doing. In fact, Elbert’s analysis is reminiscent of William C. McLoughlin’s description of revivals as “the means by which a people or a nation reshapes its identity, transforms its patterns of thought and action, and sustains a healthy relationship with environmental and social change” (2). For a significant portion of the population, then, revivalism and religious conversion were serving as an “organizer” for society. In *Merlin*, Emerson places the poet in the position of social organizer, providing a model of poetics in which the poet is an agent of conversion.

Included in the 1847 edition of *Poems* are the two early poems “Merlin I” and “Merlin II,” although it is debatable whether these poems were actually intended to be separate. What becomes clear as we read the first *Merlin* poem is Emerson’s devotion to the unity of form and concept. As he writes in “The Poet,” “[The Poet] stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature” (170). This organic marriage of form and concept—that is, the form of poetry and the concept of conversion—is evident in these *Merlin* poems, perhaps more clearly than in any of his poems.

“Merlin I” opens with three lines of iambs, alternating three and four stresses, as the speaker describes “Thy trivial harp” that “will never please/ Or fill my craving ear.” Rather than these superficial forms, the speaker believes that poetry should “ring as blows the breeze,” and introduces the first trochaic substitution in his description of the breeze: “Free, peremptory, clear.” This underscores the fundamental difference between

superficial and organic art. In fact, we see three more lines of iambs as the speaker announces that he will not be taken in by “jingling” serenades or the “tinkle” of pianos. This description is disrupted by the spondee of the “wild blood” toward the end of line 7, underscoring the barrier between the false music and the speaker’s heart, the “mystic springs” of which are set off by the trochaic trimeter of line 8. Up to this point, each line has contained either three or four stresses, and either six or eight syllables. This changes when the speaker introduces “The kingly bard” in line 9, which contains four syllables, two of them stressed, setting aside the royal stature of the poet. After line 9, the most common number of syllables in a line will be seven, though lines of three, five, ten, and fourteen will appear--indeed, after the arrival of the ideal poet, nothing will be the same.

Having provided a description of inauthentic poetry, the rest of “Merlin I” will depict the power of Merlin’s poetry. Immediately, in line 10, the speaker sets apart Merlin’s art from the “trivial” artificialities of inorganic art:

The kingly bard  
Must smite the chords rudely and hard,  
As with hammer or with mace;  
That they may render back  
Artful thunder, which conveys  
Secrets of the solar track,  
Sparks of the supersolar blaze. (ll.9-15)

Line 10 offers another spondee, followed by a dactyl, underscoring the harsh rudeness the speaker sees in Merlin’s style of playing. The predominately iambic lines have also given way to trochees, and the hammer blows of Merlin’s words give us access to the secrets of nature. This is the poet Emerson calls for in “Poetry and Imagination,” one “who lifts the veil; gives them glimpses of the laws of the universe; shows them the circumstance as illusion; shows that nature is only a language to express laws, which are

grand and beautiful, - and lets them, by his songs, into some of the realities” (12). In this sense, the poet is the prophet and priest, offering violent, ground-shaking declaration:

“Merlin’s blows are strokes of fate,” proclaims the speaker, and they are characterized by the awesome sounds of nature. Resorting to the psalmic trope of catalogue and repetition, Merlin’s admirer depicts Merlin’s art as an all-encompassing force:

With the pulse of manly hearts;  
 With the voice of orators;  
 With the din of city arts;  
 With the cannonade of wars;  
 With the marches of the brave;  
 And prayers of might from martyrs cave. (ll.21-26)

Inherent in this description are movement and vitality, sound and change (indeed, the verbs employed by Emerson throughout the poem overwhelmingly favor movement over stasis). Through the hypnotic trochaic tetrameter of lines 21-25, the speaker shows how the very description of Merlin’s words has the power to entrance a listener, a trance that remains unbroken until the return to iambic tetrameter of line 26. Merlin sings with the spirit of the World-Soul, which embraces growth as well as violence. In Emerson’s poem “The World-Soul,” this spirit embodies the union of love and violence: “He serveth the servant,/ The brave he loves amain; He kills the cripple and the sick,/ And straight begins again” (ll.89-92). As an explanation (or justification) for the startling lines above, the speaker of “The World-Soul” adds, “For gods delight in gods,/ And thrust the weak aside” (ll.93-94). Certainly, this is far removed from the “trivial harp” of the opening of “Merlin I.”

The second stanza of this poem, beginning with line 27, shows Emerson at his ironic best. In a perfect couplet of trochaic tetrameter, he writes of Merlin, “He shall not his brain encumber/ With the coil of rhythm and number” (ll.29-30). Capable though the

ideal poet is, he chooses not to write in “the coil” of perfect form, and in the most irregular lines of the poem so far, the speaker punningly connects himself to Merlin: “He shall aye climb/ For his rhyme” (ll.33-34). “Aye,” here a homonym for the first person pronoun, recalls the punning in line 83 of “The Sphinx,” when the poet describes the “aye-rolling orbit” man’s spirit must make. In lines 111-112 of the same poem, the Sphinx makes a similar pun, reminiscent of the I AM of Exodus 3:14, when she proclaims, “I am thy spirit, yoke-fellow,/ Of thine eye I am eyebeam.” As Morris writes, “Emerson’s repetitious punning on ‘I’ and ‘eye’ (and, earlier, ‘aye’) combines his constant preoccupations with the individual and with vision, emphasizing the ‘perception of identity’ to which he himself has referred in relation to the poem” (556). In this stanza of “Merlin I,” then, we see the ever-earnest Emerson using puns and irony to connect the ideal poet to the ideal vision, and Merlin to Emerson himself. Perhaps most importantly, the ideal poet is characterized by ascending progress, as he climbs (l.33), passes (l.35), and mounts “to paradise/ By the stairway of surprise” (ll.37-38).

If the first two stanzas of “Merlin I” introduce us to the ideal poet, the last three stanzas show us what his verse is capable of effecting. One power Merlin’s verse has is that of consoling: “He shall daily joy dispense/ Hid in song’s sweet influence./ Things more cheerly live and go” (ll.41-42). Here, poetry has a therapeutic capacity (one John Stuart Mill, among others, have noted). But Merlin’s powers extend beyond consolation. He reconciles “Extremes of nature,” and his lines have “Bereaved a tyrant of his will,/ And made the lion mild” (ll.51-53). Here is the enactment of Emerson’s poetic principles in “The Poet” and “Poetry and Imagination,” namely, that poetry has the power to elicit conversion in the reader. The inherent characters of lion and tyrant (ferocity and



willfulness) have been fundamentally altered by the verses of the ideal poet. Importantly, though, Merlin is not beholden to the needs of his readers: “He shall not seek to weave,/ In weak, unhappy times,/ Efficacious rhymes” (58-60). But his power remains—he can display, even to “the dull idiot,” knowledge more precious than Eden itself (if he chooses to open “the doors”): “Nor sword of angels could reveal/ What they conceal.”

While emphasizing the natural world more strongly than “Merlin I,” “Merlin II” is, largely, an extension of the first poem developing the powers of the poet. “Merlin II” continues the explication of the bard’s powers, applying to the political as well as natural worlds. The opening two lines posit that it is as a poet that Merlin “modulates the king’s affairs”—specifically, through rhyme. In this poem, “rhyme” appears four times. It “modulates the kings affairs” (l.2), causes animals to become “lovesick” (l.20), is the mechanism through which “Justice” makes order (l.38), and, in the final stanza, brings “ruin rife” through the song of the Sisters, who “Build and unbuild our echoing clay” and “Fold us music-drunken in” (ll.47-53). The immeasurable powers of the bard, then, can be used for creation as well as destruction. As we will see in “Merlin’s Song,” the most impressive aspect of this power is the ability to evoke a spiritual rebirth.

“Merlin II” also serves another key function in Emerson’s poetic oeuvre, namely, translating the Sphinx’s riddle. For classical authors, the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx is “man.” For Emerson, the answer is Nature. For, as we noted earlier in “The Sphinx,” the riddle relies heavily on pairing, and here in Merlin II, we have the explanation for this pairing:

Balance-loving Nature  
 Made all things in pairs.  
 To every foot its antipode;  
 Each color its counter glowed;

To every tone beat answering tones,  
 Higher or graver;  
 Flavor gladly blends with flavor (ll.3-9)

This truth of Merlin is the truth of the poet in “The Sphinx.” That is, the natural world is organized in pairs, each part consistently metamorphosing into its opposite.

Emerson’s later Merlin poem “Merlin’s Song” most directly explores the poet’s ability to cause metamorphosis.

Of Merlin wise I learned a song, --  
 Sing it low, or sing it loud,  
 It is mightier than the strong,  
 And punishes the proud.  
 I sing it to the surging crowd, --  
 Good men it will calm and cheer,  
 Bad men it will chain and cage.  
 In the heart of the music peals a strain  
 Which only angels hear;  
 Whether it waken joy or rage,  
 Hushed myriads hark in vain,  
 Yet they who hear it shed their age,  
 And take their youth again.

As with Emerson’s other Merlin poems, the speaker here is not Merlin himself, but one of the many who have been reborn after hearing Merlin’s song. This indicates that Merlin’s own words are too powerful to be reproduced exactly as they were spoken.

Although he opens the poem with a line of regular iambic tetrameter, the poet switches immediately to trochaic tetrameter, which adds weight to the command to “Sing it low, or sing it loud.” Either way, we are commanded to sing it, as new believers are expected to share the good news. Here, Emerson has taken us beyond conversion as a trope. Rather, conversion is a demand placed on the reader, commanded by the poet-prophet-priest.

Just as a revivalist preacher would do, the speaker “sing[s] it to the surging crowd,” and what he sings functions like the Word of God: it “punishes the proud,”

“calm[s] and cheer[s]” “Good men,” “chain[s] and cage[s]” “Bad men.” These verses resound with prophetic tones found throughout the Bible. Matthew 23:12,<sup>25</sup> which Emerson quotes in his eighty-second sermon, reads, “Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” Perhaps more specifically, David writes in Psalm 11 (also referenced in Emerson’s 82<sup>nd</sup> sermon), “Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup, For the righteous Lord loveth righteousness; his countenance doth behold the upright.” Merlin’s song also seems to perform the task of the Lord’s blessed man in Isaiah 11 (a book Emerson frequently references in his sermons): “But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth: with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked” (Isaiah 11:4). Indeed, this trope of the proud being humbled and the humble being blessed runs through both Testaments from the Psalms through the Beatitudes and Paul’s writings. By using this trope, Emerson is tying his bard to the biblical prophets and saints, and Merlin’s song to the word of God. In this way, he is sanctifying the poetic process to the level of creating holy scripture.

Merlin’s emissary may sing to the “surging crowd,” but not everyone will be able to understand the heart of the message. Although every line preceding and following line eight contains either three or four beats (and six to eight syllables) in iambs or trochees, Emerson fits four beats into ten syllables with two anapestic substitutions: “In the heart of the music peals a strain.” Like this strain, “Which only angels hear,” Emerson sets apart this line by both rhythm and meter. It is in this way that Merlin’s singer explains to his

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<sup>25</sup> Since it was commonly used by Emerson and preachers during this time, I will be using the King James Version of the bible in this study.

auditor that, while the song is for everyone, only a few will heed the call—or, in Jesus’ words, “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14). It is for this reason that “Hushed myriads hark in vain.” Those who are able to receive the singer’s good news, however, “shed their age,/ And take their youth again.” In a literal sense, Merlin’s song has the same powers as the Holy Grail sought after by the Court with which he is associated. However, in the context of revivalism and New England religiosity, Merlin’s words contain the power of the gospel, in the context of revivalism, to fundamentally transform individuals through rebirth, and to reshape society as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

In Emerson’s “The Sphinx” and his Merlin poems, the poet displayed his commitment to employing the poetic principles laid out in his essays “The Poet” and “Poetry and Imagination.” These poems also enact the principles of religious conversion later enumerated by William James. In Emerson’s poetry, then, conversion is both a trope and a rhetorical act—both a metaphor and a command to readers. Exploring this conversive nature of Emerson’s poetics highlights the socio-religious context around the time of the poems’ creation, especially given Emerson’s vocation as a minister and his exposure to the culture of revivalism. As we will see, Emerson’s conversive poetics will come to have a significant impact on the young poet Jones Very as well as other writers and artists who would use texts to convert viewers and readers.

## CHAPTER TWO

### JONES VERY'S SERMONIC POETICS: THE TWO JONES VERYS

On the evening of September 16, 1838, Jones Very stood on Elizabeth Peabody's doorstep, proclaiming his union with the Son of God. This "brave saint," as Ralph Waldo Emerson called him, then looked at Ms. Peabody and said, "I only am in the Son—and I must speak as the Son." "With these words (or to this effect)," she later recorded, "he unfolded a monstrous folio sheet of paper, on which were four double columns of Sonnets—which he said the Spirit had enabled him to write, and these he left with me to read as the utterances of the Holy Ghost" (qtd. in Gittleman 223).<sup>26</sup> The Transcendentalist circle all recognized Very's talents. Elizabeth Peabody later wrote to Emerson that the sonnets "have great artistic merit" (267); Hawthorne, who found Very rather tiresome as a person, nevertheless admitted, "he had better remain as he is...at least so long as he can write such good Sonnets"; Emerson personally edited and helped publish Very's 1839 *Essays and Poems* (Gittleman 284). But when Elizabeth Peabody later told Very that she enjoyed reading his sonnets, he was disappointed: "he smiled and said that unless they were thought beautiful because they also heard 'the Voice' of the Holy Spirit while reading them, 'they would be of no avail'" (261). Aesthetic merit was not what Very aimed for—he wanted his readers' souls. To this end, he included with a letter to Amos Bronson Alcott a sonnet so that "you should leave all which hinders the

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<sup>26</sup> Edwin Gittleman's *Jones Very: The Effective Years* still contains the best account of Very's conversion experience and the Transcendentalist circle's reaction to it. However, more details have emerged with subsequent publications by Sarah Turner Clayton in *The Angelic Sins of Jones Very* and Megan Marshall in *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*.

Spirit of God from creating you again in his image” (278). After the sonnet, Very confidently wrote, “You have now the good tidings of great joy, and I hope they are such to you” (279). It is no surprise, then, that Elizabeth Peabody would refer to Very’s folio of sonnets as “monstrous.” Not only were they overwhelming in number, but, as vessels of the Holy Spirit’s voice, they also placed arduous, supernatural demands on the reader. Specifically, they demanded conversion.

Before proceeding, I will explain what I mean by “conversion.” In this chapter, I will make use of William James’s definition of religious conversion as expressed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902): “To say that a man is ‘converted’ means...that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy” (177). It is in this sense that I am using what Molly Murray calls the “poetics of conversion,” which she defines as “the particular formal qualities of poetry—its schemes and tropes, its distinctive styles of signifying—[as they] are used to confront the unsettling phenomenon of religious change” (7). In the case of Jones Very, I will be looking at the formal as well as thematic elements of Very’s poetry as they depict and perform the process of religious conversion. Very’s poetry offers a microcosmic glimpse into nineteenth-century American religious experience by enacting the process of religious conversion, depicting the fundamental shift of perspective in a convert’s life, and expecting the reader to be reborn. Of course, other writers associated with Transcendentalism attempted to reform their audience. Amos Bronson Alcott’s oft-criticized “Orphic Sayings” assumed a prophetic pose. Orestes Brownson, after his conversion to Catholicism, tried to convert non-Catholics

through his prose writing as well. But Very's poetic vision was unique in its combination of Transcendentalist aesthetics and revivalist underpinnings.

In order to fully understand the consequent generic shifts involved in Very's poetry—the displacement of sermonic rhetorical aims into poetic practice—I will be making use of an approach espoused by Hans Robert Jauss in his work *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982): “An interpretation of a literary text as a response should include two things: its response to expectations of a formal kind, such as the literary tradition prescribed for it before its appearance; and its response to questions of meaning such as they could have posed themselves within the historical life-world of its first readers” (146). That is to say, I will be looking at the formal movements of Very's poetry through the lens of a horizon of expectations situated in nineteenth-century religious experience. In his poetry, Very was shifting these horizons, as he imported the aims and tactics of revivalist preachers into his poetry, even as his own Unitarian preaching settled into the unremarkable intellectualism of liberal Christianity. As David S. Reynolds describes in *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988), the evolution of American letters in the nineteenth century left room for such a cross-pollination: “The widespread search for replacements for bygone religious texts and dogmas produced a fluidity of genres that contributed directly to the emergence of America's national literature” (15-16). Jones Very stood at an historical crossroads, what Reynolds describes as a “crucial watershed moment between the metaphysical past and the secular future, between the typological, otherworldly ethos of Puritanism and the mimetic, earthly world of literary realism” (16). As I discussed in my previous chapter, Reynolds was right to say that Emerson had evolved “through a delighted witnessing of even more imaginative

sermonizing by evangelical preachers to his final view of the poet as priest” (16). Once Emerson had expressed this vision, Very was prepared to proclaim his own ordination as the Emersonian poet-priest.

### **Emerson and Very**

For his part, Emerson was ambivalent about this ostensible embodiment of his poetic principles. On the one hand, here was a talented young man claiming to be a “newborn bard of the Holy Ghost.” This obviously appealed to the Transcendentalists. As Lawrence Buell writes in *Literary Transcendentalism*, Very “push[ed] the Unitarian view of Jesus as representative man, extended by the Transcendentalist idea of God’s potential immanence, to its uttermost limits, and dar[ed] to assert that he too has His authority...his most distinctive hallmark as a poet is the reinterpretation of scripture and the creation from the perspective of one who has merged with God” (317).<sup>27</sup> Emerson’s journals bear out his own initial attraction to the genius of Jones Very during the latter’s period of illumination, as his conversion experience came to be known among the Transcendentalist circle.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Unsurprisingly, Alcott would go on to call Very “a pietist of the transcendental order” (Gittleman 269).

<sup>28</sup> Edwin Gittleman, for example, quotes the following from Emerson’s journal: “*Swedenborg*. He reminds me again and again of our Jones Very, who had an illumination that enabled him to excel everybody in wit and to see farthest in every company and quite easily to bring the proudest to confusion; and yet he could never get out of his Hebraistic phraseology and mythology, and, when all was over, still remained in the thin porridge or cold tea of Unitarianism” (253).



Curiously, this excitement is more ambiguous in the review of Very's volume that Emerson published in the July, 1841 edition of *The Dial*. He acknowledges a religious "genius" in the poetry that "reaches an extraordinary depth of sentiment" (130). He argues that the poems have "no pretension to literary merit, for this would be departure from [Very's] singleness, and followed by loss of insight" (130). Emerson commends the bravery of Very's transcendental mysticism: "The author...casts himself into the state of the high and transcendental obedience to the inward Spirit. He has apparently made up his mind to follow all its leadings, though he should be taxed with absurdity or even with insanity. In this enthusiasm he writes most of these verses, which rather flow through him than from him" (130). He even compares Very's sonnets to the "Decalogue or the Code of Menu."<sup>29</sup> But while there are verses that "bear the unquestionable stamp of grandeur," he admits that these do not include "the few first poems, which appear to be of an earlier date." Although Emerson himself believed in the conversive power of the poet, he argues here that this volume "should be received with affectionate and sympathizing curiosity." Overall, Emerson argues that the "sonnets have little range of topics, no extent of observation, no playfulness; there is even a certain torpidity in the concluding lines of some of them, which reminds one of church hymns" (130). Emerson's review points to a fundamental disconnect between Emerson and Very. While he could appreciate Very's devotion to "the inward Spirit," Emerson was not comfortable with the results of Very's meditations. To proclaim union with the Son of God is to fulfill the possibilities of Transcendentalism. However, calling for conversion to a will-less

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<sup>29</sup> The Ten Commandments and the sacred Hindu text (usually called the Code of Manu), respectively. Here, Emerson also seems to be emphasizing the supernatural demands being placed on the reader, as both of these analogues call their readers to a codified way of life.

existence in response to a fundamental flaw in humanity undermines the fundamental tenets of Emerson's self-reliance. As Carlos Baker writes in "Emerson and Jones Very," "The side of Emerson which admired Yankee common sense and practicality could not agree with any doctrine of will-less separation from the world of action" (94). While this ambivalence appeared in Emerson's 1841 review, he was nevertheless Very's strongest advocate from the beginning. He supported Very's poetry because he saw Very as the embodiment of the conversive poet-priest. For Emerson, the content was secondary to the production of this figure, but for Very, the message was inseparable from the form.

### **Very's Conversion**

Very expected his readers (and his friends) to become reborn in just the same manner as he had. As numerous contemporaries and subsequent biographers have noted, during the fall of 1838, Jones Very came to believe that he had attained spiritual union with God, and he wanted everyone he knew to attain the salvation he so powerfully experienced. Very described this in a letter to the Reverend H.W. Bellows on Christmas Eve, 1838:

I felt within me a new will something which came some time in the week but I could not tell what day exactly. It seemed like my old will only it was to the good—it was not a feeling of my own but a sensible will that was not my own. Accompanying this was another feeling as it were a consciousness which seemed to say—"That which creates you creates also that which you see and him to whom you speak," as it might be. These two consciousnesses as I may call them continued with me two or three weeks and went as they came imperceptibly. (qtd. in Gittleman 199)

In the breathless tone of the above letter, Very betrays the difficulty of portraying religious experience in prose.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the young poet did not limit himself to writing his friend Bellows. As one who has discovered a great secret, Very revealed his truth to anyone who would listen (willingly or otherwise)—Emerson, Hawthorne, Alcott, the Peabodys, Harvard pupils, and local ministers. Predictably, not all of his listeners were sympathetic. As Very writes, “I was moved entirely by the Spirit within me to declare to all that the coming of Christ was at hand, and that which I was led to do caused [me to] be placed contrary to my will at the asylum” (Deese lvii).<sup>31</sup> Very also called on his friends and listeners to be reborn, which likely alienated his audience, many of whom likely felt that they were sufficiently pious.

No matter the religious context, the phenomenon of conversion presupposes the need for a fundamental transformation in an individual’s understanding of the world and the self. William James describes a pre-converted individual as having “The Sick Soul”: “But there are [those] for whom evil is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial arrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy” (125). For Very, this is the state of a soul who has yet to be reborn. He describes this spiritual state most poignantly in his sonnet “The Dead”:

I see them crowd on crowd they walk the earth

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<sup>30</sup> This also conforms to William James’s criteria for a mystical experience that he lays out in *Varieties*, namely, its ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (329).

<sup>31</sup> In his fascinating work on Nineteenth-Century Asylums, *Theaters of Madness*, Benjamin Reiss explores the complex motives behind those who forced Jones Very to be committed to McLean Asylum. We will look at the results of his time there later in the chapter.

Dry, leafless trees, no Autumn wind laid bare;  
 And in their nakedness find cause for mirth,  
 And all unclad would winter's rudeness dare;  
 No sap doth through their clattering branches flow,  
 Whence springing leaves and blossoms bright appear;  
 Their hearts the living God have ceased to know,  
 Who gives the spring time to th'expectant year;  
 They mimic life, as if from him to steal  
 His glow of health to paint the livid cheek;  
 They borrow words for thoughts they cannot feel,  
 That with a seeming heart their tongue may speak;  
 And in their show of life more dead they live  
 Than those that to the earth with many tears they give.

Very's Elizabethan sonnet mostly maintains a relentless regularity through its grinding iambs. The Spirit sonneteing through Very's pen leaves the subjects in the first line unstressed, the anonymous "crowd on crowd" being observed in its faceless futility. In the beginning of the second line, however, we see the trochaic substitution of "Dry, leafless trees no Autumn wind laid bare," underscoring the lifeless and unnatural state of the spiritually dead. Very goes to great lengths to show that these souls "clattering" in the valley of dry bones are not, by nature, lifeless. This is no resurrection of Calvinistic depravity—instead, they are in this state because they have fallen away from "the living God," who is poised to offer "spring time to th'expectant year." Later, in his pulpit, Very would describe sin's effect on the fallen: "Sin has corrupted their hearts and dimmed their mental & moral perceptions. Having lost their true relation to God they have also lost that in which they should stand to the world which He has made" (qtd. in Deese 18).

Following the volta, Very's speaker shifts the focus to the actions, rather than privations, of the dead. They "mimic," "steal," "paint," and "borrow." This is not merely innate depravity, but willful artifice and deceit—the kind of deceit that victimizes itself rather than others. Weakened by their lifeless state, the unborn are shown to be

superficial and tentative. Having only a “seeming heart,” they “cannot feel.” In a sermon entitled “Jesus the Light of Life,” Very describes this spiritual numbness in more detail:

“But such is the deadening power of error & sin, that they do not feel, as they should, how great is their need of forgiveness & light” (Deese 41). The lifeless soul is in dire straits: its dying is not only inescapable (life cannot be stolen, borrowed, or painted), but it is also outside of the natural world. These souls are not merely dead, but “more dead.”

In a later sermon explicating the third chapter of Genesis, Very goes into more detail:

Painters & Poets have endeavored to give a picture of this change [the Fall] but it was one which all painting or language must in vain seek to describe. The change was within his own mind a change infinitely more important than any that can occur in the outward world. In the terrible words of the Apostle he began to be ‘*without* God in the world’ of beauty & grandeur & goodness which He made... The storm that shook his frail hut, the thunder that echoed through the sky the rage of the ocean as it dashed against the shore while they told him of God’s power awakened at the same time a fear to which he had been before a stranger. His intellect became less clear & subject to strange delusions. The remembrance of that blissful & exalted communion which he once had with his Maker became more & more obscured until it faded almost from his mind. (18)

So it is that the Dead are lost because they have, like Adam before them, attempted to press on through the world, forgetful that their lifeless state had a beginning. Bereft of true spiritual life, they can only offer a “show of life.” Such is the state of the unredeemed.

As Sarah Turner Clayton has noticed, Very married the Elizabethan and Petrarchan sonnets in his writings—specifically, he made use of the rhyme scheme and closing couplet of the Elizabethan while using the Petrarchan octave/sestet problem/solution formula. In “The Dead,” however, the sestet does not resolve or answer the problem set up in the octave. Rather it interprets the vision of the octave, explaining the significance of the spiritual prison surrounding the unsaved. In this way, Very’s

structure is less Petrarchan than it is sermonic. That is, we have a visual text followed by a doctrinal interpretation, the first two-thirds of the traditional “text-doctrine-uses structure” of the eighteenth-century sermon. Helen R. Deese comments in her introduction to Very’s sermons that, as a minister, Very organized his sermons with “vestiges of the traditional eighteenth-century sermon structure of text-doctrine-uses, but as Very uses it, it is a structure of the loosest sort” (11). So far, it would appear that Very has imported much of the sermonic structure to his poetry instead. Like Emerson before him, Very reserved his conversive appeals for his poems rather than his pulpit.

### **Very’s Theology and the Work of Salvation**

Beyond the form, Very’s descriptions of the spiritually dead recalled Calvinist Puritans of the Great Awakening. It is unsurprising, then, that writers like Yvor Winters would later associate Very with Calvinism.<sup>32</sup> Winters writes, “He preached at times in the Unitarian pulpit; he is commonly listed as one of the minor Transcendentalists; yet both facts are misleading. He was a mystic, primarily, whose theological and spiritual affiliations were with the earlier Puritans and Quakers rather than with the Unitarians or with the friends of Emerson” (263). This distinction is in no small part because, as Daniel Walker Howe writes in *The Unitarian Conscience*, “The most important characteristic distinguishing Liberals from those who remained orthodox...lay in their estimate of human nature” as early Anti-Trinitarians “had been entering protests against considering humanity depraved” (5). Ostensibly, Very is going against both his Unitarian

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<sup>32</sup> Writing 30 years after Yvors Winters, James A. Levernier argues that Very’s “view of reality is basically Calvinistic” (32) and that Very “allies Transcendentalism with Calvinism, placing it within the total context of a Calvinistic view of reality” (39). As we will see, this is a gross over-simplification.

background and his Transcendentalist friends by embracing a Calvinistic worldview abhorrent to both. However, this label does not quite fit, either. The restless suffering of the unredeemed is certainly a far cry from Jonathan Edwards's sinners who are held "over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over a fire" (Edwards 200). Nevertheless, critics like James A. Levernier are correct in that Very's conception of the human condition appears at odds with Emerson's. In his essay "Spiritual Laws," Emerson writes,

Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, origin of evil, predestination and the like. These never presented a practical difficulty to any man—never darkened across any man's road who did not go out of his way to seek them. These are the soul's mumps and measles and whooping-coughs, and those who have not caught them cannot describe their health or prescribe the cure. A simple mind will now know these enemies. (173)

Not only does Emerson denounce the doctrines of "original sin" and "origin of evil," but he also assumes that the language of self-reliance has no room for these doctrines—instead, those who have not experienced the symptoms of the Fall "cannot describe their health" to those who have.<sup>33</sup> One could say that, for the unfallen, "sin" is an empty signifier. William James would later describe this outlook aptly in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in his depiction of a person "whose soul is of this sky-blue tint...in whom religious gladness, being in possession from the outset, needs no deliverance from any antecedent burden" (80). In this sense, Jones Very fundamentally challenges the Emersonian absence of sin and evil, conditions Very believed could only be healed through religious conversion.

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<sup>33</sup> Incidentally, in his later essay "Experience," he would describe individuals' predispositions in biological terms: "I knew a witty physician who found the creed in the biliary duct, and used to affirm that if there was a disease in the liver, the man became a Calvinist, and if that organ was sound, he became a Unitarian" (310).

Unlike Calvinists, however, while Very fully embraced the idea that everyone needed to be spiritually reborn, this rebirth is not the result of election, but of effort.<sup>34</sup> That is, sin and conversion were both a product (and process) of the will. This is made most clearly in his sonnet from January of 1839 “The Corrupt Tree”:

Fast from thine evil growing within  
 Thou has no other fast than this to keep;  
 This is the root whence springs all other sin,  
 This sows the tares while thou art sunk in sleep;  
 Fast ever here, the voice must be obeyed  
 That bids thee for the Lord prepare the way;  
 Too long thine inward prayer has been delayed,  
 Awake, and in thy soul forever pray;

The opening line tells us that “evil” is not a static, inherited state of the soul, but rather a “growing” force within the individual will. Paradoxically, the reader is asked to “fast” (an act of will) from their own “will within.” While this seems impossible, it is important to remember that Very claims to have accomplished this in his own life. Edwin Gittleman quotes Very, who describes a fundamental realization that came through his spiritual awakening: “all we have belongs to God and...we ought to have no will of our own” (82). Very’s own struggle to attain will-lessness reportedly took three years, beginning in 1835 and culminating in 1838—here, Very’s speaker is commanding his reader to do the same.

The speaker in “The Corrupt Tree” describes the will in organic terms. It is a “growing” “root,” from which “springs” forth all sin, and “sows the tares” while the

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<sup>34</sup> As David Robinson writes in “Jones Very, the Transcendentalists, and the Unitarian Tradition,” this is a key move that separates him from his Calvinist counterparts: “The choice of salvation [for Very] is man’s and not God’s, and Very’s belief that man can take the initiative in his salvation indicates that he was part of the Unitarian reaction to Calvinism” (109). I would add, however, that the “salvation” Very envisions is much less Unitarian than it is Evangelical.



reader is “sunk in sleep.” While the imagery here is ominous, the organic descriptions help emphasize that evil is not a supernatural force impervious to the human will. As we have seen in “The Dead,” evil is a fundamentally spiritual problem that necessitates a spiritual solution. Although she is passively “sunk in sleep,” contrary to Calvinist doctrine, the organic imagery here shows that the individual is not helpless. Specifically, as we see in lines 5-8, it is through prayer and obedience that the individual can overcome the evil will. But these are, themselves, willful acts. Indeed, the speaker commands the reader, “Awake,” in the closing line of the octave, assuming that the reader can do so. Very continues in the sestet to assume the reader’s volitional capacity for spiritual change:

Cut down the tree that good fruit cannot bear,  
 Why cumberst it for years the fertile ground?  
 Let not a root the axe thou wieldest spare,  
 Till it no more within thy field be found;  
 Spare not, and thou shalt reap an hundred fold,  
 And a new tree shall rise where thou hast felled the old.

In six lines of this sonnet (ll. 1, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 13), the speaker begins with a command. Even line 12 uses a pun with “till,” at the beginning of the line (it is used to mean “until,” but the field imagery also points to the verb “to till”). All of these imperative verbs underscore the active role an individual has in his own awakening. The preponderance of these verbs, however, indicates the significant amount of work required to overcome evil.

One command, however, is of special import for Very. Almost all of the imperative verbs in “The Corrupt Tree” are either characterized by—or couched in—negation. In line 1, we are to “Fast from”; in line 10, we are commanded to “Let not,” and in line 13, we are told to “Spare not.” Even the commands in lines 5 and 9—to “Fast ever” and “Cut down,” respectively—are deconstructive, rather than constructive. The

only opening imperative without qualification or negation comes in line 8: “Awake.” For Very, this is clearly the essential, and primary, command. But it is not the end of the process. Here, awakening is necessary before the individual can truly destroy the root of sin. Awakening, then, is the first part of a two-part conversion process. Once awake, the convert can finally “in thy soul forever pray.” Very points to this process in his “Epistle on Prayer”:

Prayer is that action of the soul which begins at its *birth* and which consequently with the *unborn* has never begun. As the denial or death of what you now are will give you *birth*, so will prayer or the continuance in that denial give you the death again of that which is so born, by which death you attain unto immortality. The dead soul became a living [sic] and the living one has again changed its nature and become a quickening spirit, which remains or does not change. (Cole 177)<sup>35</sup>

Prayer is a unique privilege to those who have been spiritually awakened, or born, since, “When *you* who are unborn are using words to which you give that name [prayer], there is no agency at work benefiting those for whom you speak” (177). Once awakened, however, the real work begins.<sup>36</sup>

The work of becoming fully converted is arduous indeed. Not only must we “Cut down the tree that good fruit cannot bear,” but we also have to take the axe to the root itself. This is a physically grueling task, and one that requires not only agency, but also dedication and endurance. In “The Corrupt Tree,” Very is taking a step back and contextualizing this moment of conversion by placing it within the larger process of becoming a newly born spirit. William James accounts for this phenomenon in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

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<sup>35</sup> Very’s “Epistles to the Unborn” were collected and published, with an introduction, by Phyllis Cole in 1982 in *Studies in the American Renaissance*.

<sup>36</sup> Many Protestant Theologians would call this step “Sanctification,” rather than conversion, but Very does not make this distinction.

There is thus a conscious and voluntary way and an involuntary and unconscious way in which mental results may get accomplished; and we find both ways exemplified in the history of conversion, giving us two types, which Starbuck calls the *volitional type* and the *type by self-surrender* respectfully. In the volitional type the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits. But there are always critical points here at which the movement forward seems much more rapid. (184-85)

Through the arduous work of removing the roots of an established tree, Very has offered his vision of the conversion process, one which very few people (according to Jones Very) have actually undergone.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, the standards by which Jones Very would judge a true conversion would be too arduous for many of his listeners.

### **The New Birth**

The result of this arduous process is the rebirth of an individual's soul. One of Very's most famous sonnets, "The New Birth," subsequently describes this phenomenon:

'Tis a new life—thoughts move not as they did  
 With slow uncertain steps across my mind,  
 In thronging haste fast pressing on they bid  
 The portals open to the viewless wind;  
 That comes not, save when in the dust is laid  
 The crown of pride that gilds each mortal brow,  
 And from before man's vision melting fade  
 The heavens and earth—Their walls are falling now—

The opening line of "The New Birth" tells us that the speaker's mode of thinking has fundamentally changed, so much so that the very first line is interrupted by the dash separating "life" from "thoughts." That is, the new "thoughts" are still in the process of translating into a new life. While old thoughts moved "With slow uncertain steps across"

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<sup>37</sup> Although their respective definitions of evil were quite different, similar imagery shows up in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: "There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root" (49).

the speaker's mind, the thoughts of the reborn are "pressing" "In thronging haste," opening his consciousness to "the viewless wind," or the Holy Spirit.

Very offers a barrier to the volta as he describes the primary obstacle to rebirth: pride. Once this impediment is gone, however, "before man's vision melting fade/ The heavens and earth." This spiritual process becomes concrete reality for the speaker as the sestet encroaches into the octave to announce that the walls separating "the heavens and earth" "are falling now":

Fast crowding on each thought claims utterance strong,  
Storm-lifted waves swift rushing to the shore  
On from the sea they send their shouts along,  
Back through the cave-worn rocks their thunders roar,  
And I a child of God by Christ made free  
Start from death's slumbers to eternity.

Following the volta we see the imagery growing loud and dynamic. Thoughts that were "slow" now "haste fast," the "dust" and "crown of pride" disappear as the walls crumble down, "storm waves swift" rouse the sea, which "shouts" along with the "thunder's roar." The pace of the lines increases, as well, ushered along by the overwhelming sibilance of lines 9-10 signaling the arrival of the baptismal ocean waves. Indeed, what was lifeless, static, and silent has become dynamic and filled with sound. The process begun in the opening line is finished, and the speaker is now "a child of God by Christ made free/ Start[ing] from death's slumbers to eternity." As William James writes, "The process [of conversion] is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before" (143). For Very, this rebirth is the culmination of a long, strenuous process of spiritual discipline. But once this moment arrives, the convert is now a new, fundamentally changed, soul.

In “The New Birth,” then, form and content ally to enact (and attempt to evoke) the process of religious conversion. In this way, Very is participating in the nineteenth-century rhetoric surrounding religious conversion. One popular medium for eliciting conversion through the written word was the genre of conversion narratives, which were related orally in church congregations, and later published as pamphlets circulated to the general public. In her book-length study *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*, Patricia Caldwell notes the “skeletal” structure of the conversion narrative, which follows a relatively common pattern: “the expectable sequence of sin, preparation, and assurance; conviction, compensation, and submission; fear, sorrow, and faith” (2). In the context of New England Puritanism, the conversion narrative accomplished two primary functions, namely, the inward assurance for the converted individual and the outward assurance for the congregation that the speaker truly belongs in the church. The first function is primarily psychological, the second primarily social (and, arguably, theological). Caldwell quotes one Sister Greere, who gave her narrative at Wenham in the year 1644: “this practice of relation submitted to privately for example’s sake, the safety of this church, and this [publicly] to the honor of God” (132). Similarly, Very’s depiction of the individual soul follows the pattern of “sin, preparation, and assurance” that Caldwell describes. It is understandable, then, that Very’s readers (including Yvors Winters and Sarah Turner Clayton) have viewed his poetry as part of a tradition of conversion narratives. As we will see, however, this does not account entirely for Very’s poetics.

### The Poet and the Preacher

As Jauss writes, “The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of his lived praxis, performs his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on his social behavior” (39). In order to accomplish this, we must understand how Very conceived of his vocation and his mission in more detail. In “The Dead,” “The Corrupt Tree,” and “The New Birth,” Very reveals how he perceives the vocation of the poet. As Very writes in his essay on Shakespeare (published along with “The New Birth” in 1839), “it can only be by being born again, by becoming again through obedience as little children, and by feeling more fully than we have yet done the meaning of that sublime declaration of our Lord’s, ‘all that the Father hath is mine’” (61). Gittleman correctly calls this not only a commentary on Shakespeare, but also “a blueprint for action” (196). While in his essay “The Poet,” Emerson describes the ideal poet who “unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene” (177), he also bemoans that he “look[s] in vain for the poet whom I describe” (179). With the “monstrous folio” handed to Elizabeth Peabody, Very is claiming that he has provided the very mind-altering, conversion-inducing poetry Emerson describes only in hypotheticals.

Many nineteenth-century American readers, however, were more frequently shaped by the sermon than they were by poetics. As Dawn Coleman argues in her essay “The Antebellum American Sermon as lived Religion,” Americans broadly “tended to imagine the most effective preachers as links between the human and the divine, as awesome and often threatening conduits between the visible and invisible worlds”

(528).<sup>38</sup> This was especially true of revivalist preachers, who actively tried to impel their listeners through the three-step process Caldwell describes above. Coleman quotes one contributor to Sprague's *Annals of the American Pulpit*, who described a Methodist preacher in New York:

For more than two hours, there was a vast sea of up-turned faces, gazing at him, in breathless silence, as he delivered one of the most alarming sermons I ever heard. It seemed as if the preacher were actually standing between Heaven and Hell, with the songs of the redeemed and the wailings of the lost both vibrating on his ear, and throwing his whole soul into an effort to secure the salvation of his hearers. (537)

As Coleman comments, "Surrender to the preacher was interpreted as surrender to God himself, an idea reinforced by comparisons of effective preachers to irresistible natural forces" (537). Judging from his comments to Peabody (which betrayed his disappointment at his reader's mere enjoyment of his poetry), one can imagine Very expecting his readers to be similarly moved by his iterations of the Spirit. There is a shift of horizons here, then, as Very's readers encounter the same tropes and mission they would have come to expect at a revival meeting.

Very's conception of the preacher comes through most prominently in his sonnet from this period entitled "The Preacher":<sup>39</sup>

The world has never known me bid them hear  
My word it speaks will they but hear its voice  
I will uphold thee banish every fear  
And in my name alone fore'er rejoice  
Thou hast been by my Holy Spirit led  
And it shall lead you still as gently on  
Till thou hast on the word I give you fed

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<sup>38</sup> Coleman's essay is part of a collection put together by Robert Ellison in 2010, entitled *A New History of the Sermon*, this volume of which focuses on the nineteenth century.

<sup>39</sup> Helen R. Deese dates this poem between the fall of 1838 and the summer of 1839. As with many of Very's sonnets during this period, there is no punctuation until the final line.

And in my name the crown of life have won  
 Come hasten on thou shalt not want for I  
 Will be your guide your rest and your defence  
 Be strong I wipe the tears from every eye  
 And to my Father's house will lead you hence  
 Put on thine armor daily fight with me  
 And you my glory soon in joy shall see.

Perhaps more than any other poem in his oeuvre, this sonnet depicts the supernatural, anointed nature of the ministerial vocation glorified by revivalists. On the one hand, it is not uncommon to hear any preacher argue that, if only their church members would listen to them, they would all find their way to salvation. Very's preacher cares for his flock like a loving parent, wiping "the tears from every eye" as he promises to lead them "to my Father's house." Continuing with the common battlefield imagery used by contemporary preachers, Very's preacher urges his listeners, "Put on thine armor daily fight with me." What is unusual in Very's preacherly posture is his speaker's identification with God himself. The listener "has been by my Holy Spirit led," and the speaker promises that "you my glory soon in joy shall see." By being a bridge between the natural and supernatural worlds, this preacher self-identifies as a citizen of both heaven and earth to the point of proclaiming his own semi-divine nature (attained, ostensibly, through Very's submission to absolute will-lessness). This depiction of the preacher is much closer to evangelical revivalism than it is to Very's Unitarian surroundings. As Daniel Walker Howe explains in *The Unitarian Conscience*, although contemporary Unitarian preachers were not entirely dedicated to "the sparse utilitarianism of the Puritan 'plain style,'" they did not surrender their style completely to emotionalism (197). This held true for both sermons and poetry: "As long as the emotions awakened by literature were carefully contrived, Harvard Unitarians assumed



they could ‘work safely’ under rational control, without usurping supremacy and becoming ‘turbulent masters’” (197). This is a far cry from the preacher identifying with the Son of God.

Very’s preacherly exhortation takes place not in the pulpit, but in the sonnet. By using the sonnet as a method of conversion, Very is replacing the sermon (of which he went on to write over a hundred) with the poem. That is, whereas the most popular means of conversion during the 1830s in New England was the well-crafted sermon, Very is making the case that fourteen lines of verse can work more effectively. Therefore, when Sarah Turner Clayton writes in her monograph that “The New Birth” “proclaim[s] the possibility of being spiritually reborn” (19), she is only partially correct. Very’s sonnets are not conversion narratives—they are a remedy for spiritual death. Even more significant, however, especially for a writer who has been called an Orthodox Calvinist by numerous critics, Very is claiming to provide utterances of the Holy Spirit. He is providing a new sacred text. If we are to meet his demands, then, we are required to read his poetry as closely and carefully as we would read the Holy Scriptures. In this way, for Very, close reading has become a means of salvation.

Part of the tension that arose between Very and his New England surroundings stems from this revivalistic posture he maintained (both in his poetry and in his life). As Dawn Coleman points out, Unitarians were slightly similar to revivalist preachers in that they “shared the ideas that effective preachers caused pain...preaching functioned as a means of grace only insofar as it created a conviction that one needed to make spiritual changes” (535). On the whole, however, Unitarians were severely skeptical of the effects of revivalist preaching. Daniel Walker Howe writes, “Unitarian evangelists found fault

with orthodox revivalists...because they often failed to observe the proper balance in their appeals” (163). Therefore, “The legitimate function of rhetoric was to enlist the emotions in the service of reason and the moral sense. A speaker who went beyond this was a demagogue, a revolutionary who would overturn the established order of things...The hysteria which sometimes accompanied revivalism disgusted Unitarians; it seemed to rob men of all their individuality and reason” (163). Jones Very was a shock to the system. For the Transcendentalists, he was a throwback to the Great Awakening preachers; for the Unitarian establishment, he was a deranged enthusiast threatening to “overturn the established order of things.” It comes as no surprise, then, that his only recourse was to acquiesce to his committal to McLean Asylum, where he spent one month in 1838.<sup>40</sup>

### **Very After McLean**

Most contemporary observers agreed that over the next several months after his stay, Jones Very calmed down a great deal. As Alex Beam writes in his historical study of McLean Asylum, *Gracefully Insane*, “almost as dramatically as he had acted up, Very inexplicably calmed down” (37). Beam quotes Emerson biographer John McAleer: “Very no longer felt God-directed...The result was he had become a dull fellow” (37). This was a welcome change for the local Unitarian establishment, but a serious disappointment for Very’s friends. After her visit with the young poet, Margaret Fuller complained, “His state is imperfect” (Gittleman 362). By 1842, Emerson was describing his correspondence with Very as “indifferent” (Babbett 113). Emerson and Very

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<sup>40</sup> We will look at Very’s clashes with the establishment more closely in a later chapter.

“gradually grew apart,” as Deese notes, “Emerson complaining that Very, ‘when all was over, still remained in the thin porridge or cold tea of Unitarianism’” (2). This is in striking contrast with 1838 descriptions of Jones Very during his period of “illumination,” as Emerson had called it (or madness, depending on the commentator). Most importantly, for the present study, this image of the post-McLean Very would come to have an enormous impact on Very’s readers through to the present day. As we will see, Benjamin Reiss may be more accurate when he writes that Very “learned to modify his behavior enough to satisfy authorities, while never renouncing his vision” (140).<sup>41</sup>

Critics have traditionally noted a drop-off in the quality of Very’s work after 1839. In his 1942 biography, William Irving Babbett writes, “He had once been so powerfully excited, and under that excitation had uttered a message of such tremendous purport, that his subsequent quietism was too definitely an anticlimax. Emerson had expected the light to sustain its brilliance, and he had been disappointed” (119). In his highly influential study *Jones Very: The Effective Years* (1967), Gittleman writes, “Unfortunately, in the remaining forty years of his life [after 1839] Jones Very could never bring himself to abandon an effete sort of poetry...As a poet, the rest was anticlimax” (372). In part responding to this dismissal of Very’s later output, Sarah Turner Clayton writes tepidly in her 1999 monograph, “If readers of today can become less critical of Very’s later poetic production and can set it aside from his inspirational sonnets, then he may find a place in their hearts and anthologies” (8). Although she gives

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<sup>41</sup> What happened after his release from McLean is, indeed, a question of perspective. For Dr. Luther Bell, McLean’s superintendent, Jones Very was cured through expert treatment (especially through diet). For some friends who saw him soon after his release, including Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Very was “as crazy as ever” (Reiss 120).

slight attention to Very's post-1839 poetry, Clayton nevertheless concedes, "His poetry, like his life, had become more socially acceptable, if less problematic, to his audience" (84). It would seem that critics have settled on a consensus regarding the poetic career of Jones Very. In this narrative, Very was a promising young mind, influenced by Transcendentalists, who possessed a great deal of poetic talent early on. This poetic talent was informed by his brief outburst of religious enthusiasm (perhaps a mental disorder). After he passed through this phase, he settled down and became the reliable itinerant Unitarian minister we see in his sermons—a respected member of the clergy, if a boring poet who had lost his edge.

As a Unitarian minister, Very appears to have been unremarkable. He never held a permanent position of his own, instead supplying for other Unitarian ministers.<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting, as Helen R. Deese writes, "Charles W. Upham, minister at Very's home congregation in Salem, was by 1843 confident enough of [Very's] recovery that he allowed him to supply for him" (3). There are no more recorded dust-ups between Very and the Unitarian establishment, and he even supplied for Universalist and Baptist preachers on occasion (Deese 4). In general, obituaries appearing soon after the minister's death did not praise his preaching style. One writer reflected, "He failed in the ministry, not because he had nothing to say, but because he had no voice, no manner, no presence, to give distinct and forcible utterance to his thoughts. His voice was low, and at times, indistinct" (Deese 4). Twenty years after Very's death, G.M. Hammell writes in *The Methodist Review* that Very was nevertheless admired by fellow Unitarian preachers:

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<sup>42</sup> Supply preachers were itinerant ministers with no home congregation of their own. Instead, they "supplied" for churches until the congregation found a new permanent minister or their permanent minister returned after a temporary leave. In other cases, supply ministers were invited to give guest sermons.

“He was never ‘popular’ and did not do much for ‘the world;’ but a minister for whom he sometimes preached said, ‘I told my people that to see Very for half an hour in my pulpit and know that such a man existed in the world was a far greater sermon than any ever preached to them from the lips of an orator’” (Hammell 20). Even this endorsement concedes that Very’s gifts lay not in the skills of a preacher but in the example of a saint. In an unsigned obituary in *The Harvard Register*, another writer concludes, “A thoroughly pure man, a religiously faithful student, he consecrated his life to noblest ends; and though his name is not sounded with the trumpet of fame he is enshrined in the hearts of thousands whom his Christian faith has comforted and uplifted” (130).

While Very’s delivery in the pulpit may not have inspired his listeners, they nevertheless offer a useful glimpse of the poet after his period of illumination. He still criticized a worldview that is “prone to look upon the spiritual world as too separate & remote from the natural, as holding no communication with it” (Deese 40). He still professed hope in awakening the spiritually unborn: “They will awaken faith in Him who spake them; he will no longer abide in darkness, but leave his sins & errors & follow the Risen Savior” (42). Christianity is to man “What Spring is to nature...It is a quickening breath reaching our inward nature awakening it to life & activity” (44). Very even prays that “our churches no longer be given up to emptiness or semi-attendance on Public Worship; but let them be filled full; filled to their utmost capacity with devout & fervent worshippers” (57). Even in these brief outbursts of fervor, however (within otherwise generally restrained prose), the former sharpness of Very’s vision can seem blunted.

In a sermon on “Fruits and Purposes of Special Revelation,” we see Very offering a reflection on the Apostle Paul’s plight after the his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Very writes,

And when the Savior had given him a charge as an Apostle to bear his name before the Gentiles & kings, and the children of Israel; he was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision. He proved the change that had been wrought in him by the labors [,] dangers & sufferings that he endured on account of the Gospel...For its sake he endured stripes, was stoned, encountered perils by sea & land, was in perils from his own countrymen & from the heathen, in perils in cities & in the wilderness; he was in weariness & pain, in watchings often, in hunger & thirst, in fastings often, in cold & nakedness. But all these things could not separate him from the love of Christ, or quench that love in him. Nay, in all these things he was more than a conqueror through Him that loved him (36).

In this detailed passage, we have to wonder if Very had not thoroughly identified with the Apostle Paul and his persecutions. Had not Very himself endured persecution from the Harvard administration, from Charles Upham, and those who forced him to be committed to McLean? In his own “watchings” and “fastings” in McLean, perhaps Very never allowed his vision to be “quench[ed].” If Very’s sermons themselves do not reveal a minister proclaiming Very’s original vision, perhaps the Rev. Dr. J. T. G. Nichols, a classmate of Very’s who is quoted in the obituary in *The Harvard Register*, was right: “His chosen profession was the Christian ministry. Cut off from this, there was left him the pen, with which he has ministered effectually, and will continue to minister, to multitudes who otherwise had not known him” (130). In Nichols’s estimation, Very never stopped trying to awaken his audience. A calm presence in the pulpit, he nevertheless maintained his prophetic pose as a poet. If true, this would fundamentally challenge the established portrait of the older Very as a cured madman and a washed-up prodigy.

### The Two Jones Verys

The prevailing view of Very is that he wrote compelling poetry during his period of religious psychosis, but once he was cured of madness, his poetry suffered. This view began with Emerson and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, continued through Very's biographers William Irving Babbett and Edwin Gittleman, and persists in recent scholarship on Very, including Sarah Turner Clayton's monograph *The Angelic Sins of Jones Very*. If we ignore Very's later poetry or dismiss it as "effete," we can look at the remarkable poetic output during his youthful madness and contrast it with the sedate tones of his later sermons. But Very's journal and his later poetry actually show us that something else is happening. However convenient the traditional narrative of Jones Very may be, it is nevertheless fatally flawed. As late as 1841, Very was still claiming to have visions. In a notebook now available at the Houghton Library in Cambridge, Very records one of these visions:

#### A Vision. The Mountain of Flesh.

I looked and I saw a mountain of flesh, as if the carcasses of all that lived upon the earth had been piled one upon another. And as I looked there came one having in his hand a torch with which he touched beneath the ^dry brush and [illegible] trees on which the bodies had been piled, and immediately the whole was wrapped [sic] in one vast sheet of flame as ^with a fiery robe garment. The smoke filled the heaven and obscured the sun. It burnt for many days and nights, and neither the sun was seen by day nor the moon or stars by night in all that time. IIP After this I looked again; and saw another return [illegible] and the four winds were let loose, and blew fiercely upon the ashes left <sup>raised</sup> from the burning and it was scattered over all the land <sup>world</sup>, and fell in fine dust <sup>upon over every country</sup> upon every field, and dwelling <sup>upon the</sup> and upon every sea. grass and upon the corn-field, and upon all tilled lands. IIP And again, <sup>after much time</sup>, I looked; and where it had lain the grass had grown stouter <sup>thicker</sup> and higher than ever before I had seen it, and the grain and all that was planted had increased so that the fields seemed full to overflowing like the sea with <sup>its</sup> waves..

And I heard a voice saying, "Thus shall it be with all Flesh at the Coming of the Lord!" ~~Now Shall~~ The dust returns to the dust as the way and the spirit to God who made it.<sup>43</sup>

In this notebook entry, Very uses the grotesque imagery of burning corpses to illustrate the coming destruction of "all Flesh" as a concrete, physical process that is pervasive throughout the natural world. This is not the quiet, socially acceptable, pietistic faith Very is said to have calmed into after 1839. Instead, this is the universal, apocalyptic extension of what Very was warning against during his purported union with God.<sup>44</sup> Here, the speaker places himself in the prophet's chair, describing the picture laid before him just as Ezekiel or John of Patmos were said to have done. Though at least two years removed from his stay at McLean, the speaker in "The Mountain of Flesh" vision appears just as the speaker of Very's sonnet "Flee to the mountains," which was written during his illumination:

The morn is breaking see the rising sun  
Has on your windows cast his burning light  
Arise the day is with you onward run  
Lest soon you wander lost in the murky night  
I will be with you 'tis your day of flight  
Hasten the hour is near you cannot fly

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<sup>43</sup> This passage remains unpublished. I have attempted to display the marginalia here in contrast to the body of the passage. See Figure 1.

<sup>44</sup> In a sermon preached in July of 1860, Very describes this in a different tone:  
Nor need we suppose that although at the last the unfaithful and the evil doers will be made manifest, and separated from the faithful & the good; that therefore they will be cast into a furnace of fire. It must mean that a more marked distinction will be shown between the good and the bad, that the one class will be rewarded, the other punished; in being made to see the evil of their ways, and in being subject to such a shame and discipline as shall destroy the evil that is in them. There are doubtless many good as well as bad things beyond this present world, but there is no one being I suppose absolutely evil. All created beings are good or bad relatively to us; and I cannot imagine any to be absolutely evil. (Deese 59)  
This illustrates the importance of genre in Very's eschatology. In his sermons, he speaks as the rational explicator of doctrine, while in his poetry, and unpublished journal, he maintains the pose as prophet, seer, and revivalist preacher.



Leave all for he who stops can never fight  
The foe that shall assail him from on high

In the opening octave of this sonnet, the speaker focuses on how the reader is unable to escape the devastation of the Last Days. The very breathlessness of this poem (enhanced, of course, by the complete lack of punctuation) betrays the urgency of the speaker's message. After the volta, the speaker shifts the focus to the present tense, increasing the level of immediacy even further:

They come the plagues that none can flee  
Behold the wrath of God is on you poured  
Oh hasten find the rest He gives in me  
And you shall fear no fear in me restored  
They cannot pause oh hasten while you may  
For soon shall close around thy little day.<sup>45</sup>

The listener must flee, lest she is left to be “assail[ed]” by “The foe,” and punished by “the plagues that none can flee,” an outpouring of God's wrath. “The Mountain of Flesh” has a similar disregard for the polish of Very's more restrained pieces, again as though the speaker must hasten to move his audience to action, lest they face the consequences that wait for the unrepentant who choose the flesh over the spirit. The speaker closes by emphasizing the disparity of importance between this spiritual reality and “thy little day.” This sonnet is one indication, and much of his later poetry bears this out, that Very's conversive vision never fully receded.

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<sup>45</sup> Although this appears to be a pre-McLean poem, the precise dating is uncertain. Helen R. Deese's range is about as close as we can get—namely, somewhere between the fall of 1838 and the summer of 1839. If we are to look at his poetry through the lens of his biography, we may be inclined to see this as more likely written in the fall of 1838, just before he was committed to McLean, perhaps just as he was proclaiming this message to his Harvard students before he was discharged from his tutorial duties.

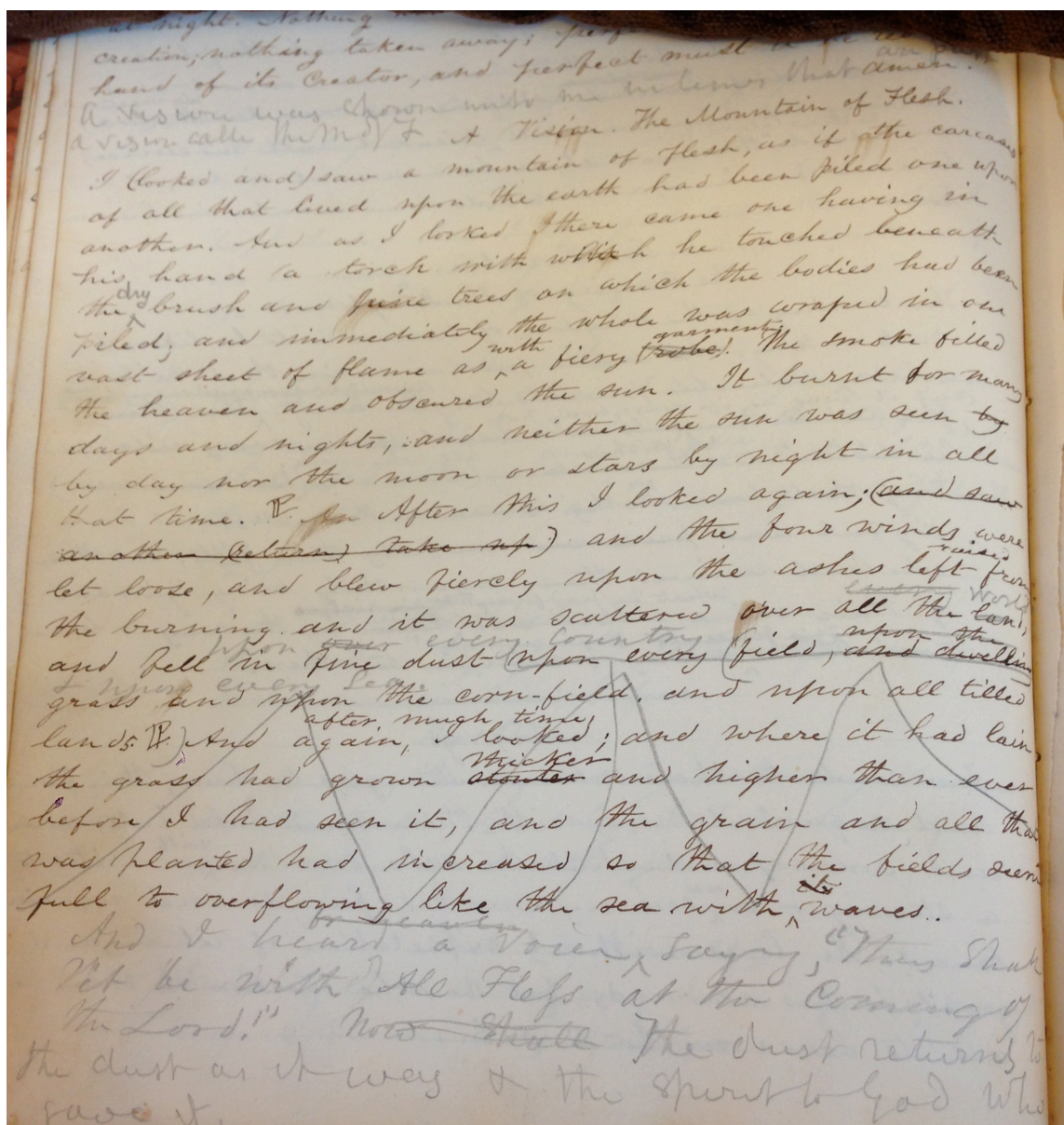


Fig. 1. *A Vision. The Mountain of Flesh.* Houghton Library, Harvard University, 2000M-19

In 1849, ten years after his one-month stay at McLean Asylum, Jones Very was still writing sonnets calling his readers to a new birth. His sonnet “The Things Before,” for instance, is dated July 21, 1849:

I would not tarry, Look! The things before  
 Call me along my path, with beckoning love;  
 The things I gain wear not the hues they wore,

For brighter glories now my spirit move.  
 Still on; I seek the peace my master sought,  
 The world cannot disturb his joy within;  
 It is not with its gold and silver bought,  
 They give not victory over death and sin.

Even in his later poetry, Very is still experimenting with the sonnet form. Rather than subverting the Petrarchan structure (as we saw in “The Dead” and “The New Birth”), however, the structure of “The Things Before” maintains the Petrarchan problem/solution formula while relying on the Elizabethan rhyme scheme. There is a tension in the imperative “Look!” in the first line, as it interrupts the speaker with punctuation and tone, as it nevertheless maintains the iambic pentameter established in the first two feet. Indeed, while this is a call for the reader to interrupt his own life, it is a continuation of the message Very has been writing for over a decade. Already, though, we see a difference in tone from Very’s earlier sonnets. Very is not speaking as the voice of the Holy Spirit, but as a converted sinner working to maintain his balance on the righteous path—much more like a traditional preacher than Very’s speaker in his earlier poem “The Preacher.” Very’s speaker begins with a description of his own temptations to the sensual pleasures of the world, which “Call me along my path, with beckoning love.” This is not a one-time change in this poem, but a process: “Still on; I seek the peace my master sought.” In this way, he is affirming to his reader that he is human (rather than the Second Coming), and that he can work his way through the maze of temptation that is the world of the senses. Similarly, his readers, if they are also reborn, can also stay on the straight and narrow:

Awake, ye sensual, from your sleep of shame!  
 Shake off the slumbers of the earthly mind;  
 For higher objects now your spirits claim,  
 To which the soul, that slumbers here, is blind;

Objects which, like the soul itself, endure;  
 Things that are true, and lovely, just, and pure.

In “The Corrupt Tree,” Very placed the imperative “Awake” in the eighth line, positioning it within the octave just before the volta. Here, ten years later, the same command serves as the beginning of the sestet, addressed to “ye sensual.” He calls the readers to “Shake off the slumbers of the earthly mind,” emphasizing the process of religious practice, rather than the passive moment of rebirth. This is the “volitional” conversion that, as William James describes, is often gradual: “In the volitional type the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits” (185). Nevertheless, although this later depiction of conversion betrays a more gradual process, Very is still calling for religious awakening through his poetry.

Since his poetry calls for religious conversion, the elevated opinion of the poet’s role in an individual’s spiritual life is inherent in Very’s poetics. While this is implicit in the poetry he wrote during his illumination, he would make this more explicit in his later poetry. In his 1859 sonnet “The Poet,” Very writes,

As one who ‘midst a choir alone doth sing,  
 When voices harsh fill all his soul with pain,  
 So that from even a note he would refrain,  
 And flee away as with a dove’s swift wing,  
 Yet for Religion’s sake you see him stay,  
 And try to raise her service what he may;--  
 So doth the Poet live amidst his age!  
 Though at the first his lyre he scarce can hear,  
 He does not drown its discords in his rage,  
 Nor fly where they will not offend his ear;  
 But for their very sakes who spoil his songs,  
 His heaven-taught strain he more and more prolongs;  
 Till one by one they with his paeon blend,  
 And all in one harmonious concert end.

One problem we first encounter is the myriad voices surrounding the poet, amongst whom he struggles to find his voice. The poet is “one... ‘midst a choir.” As choristers are trained to blend their voices with either the harmony or the melody, so are all of the singers here expected to fall in line. Something about these voices, however, is distasteful enough to “fill all his soul with pain.” This speaks to the ugly music projected by the choir, but it also displays the power of song over one’s spiritual well-being. Tempting though it may be to “flee away as with a dove’s swift wing,” the Poet nevertheless stays among this choir “for Religion’s sake.” Although we may interpret this as a glorification of standing for religious principles, the speaker makes it clear that the Poet’s perseverance is for the sakes of those “who spoil his songs” that he stays. Very’s speaker also gives the Poet the traditional bard’s instrument, the lyre, linking him to bards of classical and medieval literature, and to King David, whose music drove away the demon torturing Saul.<sup>46</sup> As a preacher, Very may have been (in the words of an obiter in the *Christian Register*), “singularly unfitted for the rough work of the world. The gifts of the popular orator were not his. However chaste the beautiful simplicity of his thought and speech, he had no adequate means of communication but his pen” (qtd. in Deese 4). As a poet, however, Very’s pose was, and continued to be, that of a bard singing his fellows to spiritual awakening.

Very’s poet, then, is not a preacher giving a monological sermon. Rather, he stands with the choir and plays his “heaven-taught strain” until his fellow choristers are not only moved to change their melody, but to end “all in one harmonious concert.” The Poet, here, is characterized by defiance, talent, virtue, and perseverance. Although he

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<sup>46</sup> See 1 Samuel 16. As we will see in the next chapter, Very eventually applies his conversive poetics to visual art, as well.

cannot hear his own song, he trusts his fingers until his lonely song becomes adopted by the group. In this way, the Poet fulfills the spiritual and pedagogical function of the preacher. He awakens, inspires, and teaches. Significantly, it is not only the content of the song (the message through the lyrics), but the melody itself that the singers emulate. That is, the very form of the song becomes a means to salvation. By proceeding in the form prescribed by the poet, Very's listeners can become awakened themselves. As Emerson writes in "The Poet," "[The poet] is isolated among his contemporaries by truth and by his art, but with this consolation in his pursuits, that they will draw all men sooner or later" (288). Twenty years removed from his stay at McLean, Jones Very is still describing the Poet's vocation in Emersonian terms. Calm as he may have been in the pulpit, we are seeing the continuation of the illuminated Very's original poetic aims.

Very illustrates the Emersonian poet's transformative power in his 1861 lyric "The Poet's Plea." As with Emerson's bard, Very's poet

...touches with diviner skills the strings,  
And from his harp there breathes a holier strain;  
Such as the watchful shepherds wondering heard,  
When the still night by angels' lyres was stirred!  
That strain harmonious through the war-worn earth  
Shall yet be heard, and every nation move; (ll.11-16)

Again the Poet is tied to traditional bardic tropes. He plays on his harp "with diviner skills," which "breathes a holier strain," associated with both angels and nations. Here, the poet moves beyond gaining individual converts:

The warrior hears, and drops his blood-stained sword,  
No more with war's fierce flames his bosom burns;  
Man in God's image is once more restored,  
The golden age of Peace and Love returns;  
And Nature with new beauty decks her bowers,  
Scattering with lavish hand her fruits and flowers (ll.24-29).

We have moved beyond individual salvation—the poet’s song is not merely inspiring, but transformative, affecting natural, theological, and historical change.

In both the form and message of his poems, Very consistently evinced a philosophy of poetry that assumed the form’s unique capacity for spiritual transformation and social change. In his youth, his poetry was penned by the Holy Spirit, the Second Coming, the Prophet, the “newborn bard of the Holy Ghost,” as Emerson would say. Although Very’s subsequent readers are right to note a change of tone in his later poems, a close reading of these late works reveals that the poet’s revivalistic aspirations never left. Rather than calming into an “effete” poet whose primary vocation was as a middling Unitarian supply preacher, Very worked within the confines of his rhetorical constraints as a preacher only to continue his prophetic work as a poet. As a minister, Very found the genre of the sermon insufficient for his calls to salvation. Therefore, he stayed within the horizons of his listeners’ expectations, offering spiritual advice and encouraging piety according to the Scriptures. In the poetry, thanks in no small part to the poetics he learned from Ralph Waldo Emerson, he was able to continue his explorations of mystical experience, supernatural evil, and, especially, religious conversion. Traditionally, Very’s work has been bifurcated into two separate authorships: the illuminated genius, whose poetry captivated his readers, and the cured madman who could no longer write with vision. As we have seen, there are indeed two Jones Verys, but they are not separated chronologically. Rather, they are separated by genre. In his sermons, we see a supply minister fulfilling his vocational duties. In his poetry, however, we see the visionary poet continuing to explore the boundaries of spiritual experience. For Very, then, poetry was more religious than preaching.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SACRED PANORAMAS:

#### RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND AMERICAN ICONOGRAPHY, 1840-1860

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on midnoon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.

--Emerson, "Circles," 252.

Most art historians trace the origins of the moving panorama back to the Irish painter Robert Barker, who composed and displayed a popular panoramic painting of Edinburgh in 1785 (Avery 1). Although they caught on only briefly in London and Paris, moving panoramas had become hugely popular in the eastern United States by the middle of the nineteenth century. In his dissertation on the history of the panorama, Kevin J.

Avery describes the mechanism of moving panoramas:

Developed in Britain in the 1810s and 1820s, the moving panorama was an extended strip of canvas on which a rendering of a continuous landscape or narrative passed before the spectator's eyes. The canvas was mounted on a cylinder concealed behind one side of a proscenium, the scenery rolled off the cylinder onto another behind the other side of the proscenium. The illusion sought was that the viewer was in the moving vehicle, looking out the window at the passing landscape (51).

Unlike the original style of panorama, in which observers were surrounded by canvas, moving panoramas appealed to viewers who, as Stephan Oettermann writes, "were no longer surrounded by a canvas that only appeared to present an open vista on all sides; rather they saw the vast landscape of their continent unrolling before their eyes, as if they were traveling westward in a covered wagon" (323). In this way, the popular genre mirrored the expanding vision of a growing nation. It also mirrored the shifting vantage point of an increasingly mobile population. By the 1850s, Tom Hardiman notes, "hundreds of moving panoramas, depicting myriad voyages, travels, and historical



events, were exhibited as traveling entertainments all across the country” (14). One of the most influential of these was John Banvard’s 1846 moving panorama of the Mississippi River—a “Three Mile Picture,” according to Banvard (Avery 110)—which helped inspire many of the landscape descriptions in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Evangeline*.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Banvard’s successful panorama “was seen by an estimated 2,200,000 or more people over its five years’ exhibition in America, Britain, and France” (110). In this chapter, we will explore how poems mediated panoramas and vice versa, suggesting mutual formal engagement between the visual and the verbal, and between “low” and “high” art. Specifically, this chapter will explore ekphrastic engagements with two of the most popular moving panoramas in the nineteenth century: John Banvard’s panorama of the Mississippi River and Kyle’s and Dallas’s Moving Panorama of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. We will also see how these panoramas stood at the intersection between secular and spiritual interpretations of the American landscape.

### **A New Kind of Panorama**

In November of 1850, an exhibition opened in New York City that challenged contemporary categories of popular and fine art. The Moving Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress used the popular genre of panoramic art, but it was designed and executed by some of the most talented American artists at the time, including Frederic Church and Peter Paul Duggan. But it was not the quality of the art alone that drew upwards of 200,000 people—almost a third of the city’s population at the time (Avery 17). The subject of this panorama, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, was as popular as any book

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<sup>47</sup> Dorothy Dondore discusses the impact of this panorama in her article “Banvard’s Panorama and the Flowering of New England.”

in American history to that point, and a largely pious crowd was drawn in by the prospect of spiritual edification. In this way, the panorama genre would come to challenge the categories of pop and fine art. This was equally true of poetic engagements with *The Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress* as it was of parallel engagements with John Banvard's *Mississippi Panorama*.

*The Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress* inspired two ekphrastic sonnets by two disparate poets--one, an itinerant Unitarian minister named Jones Very, the other a prolific historian named Elizabeth Fries Ellet, whose forays into male-dominated genres threatened the intellectual establishment of her day. A close look at these two sonnets, as well as the culture and individuals behind them, reveals both the piety and ambition of a nation emerging from the shadow of their Puritan ancestors. At the same time, these sonnets show the pressures on ekphrastic poetry that attempts to engage with images that are already saturated with cultural and religious significance.

Although poets would occasionally use them for sacred means, popular panoramas were often designed and executed by amateurs for an ostensibly undiscerning public. Even John Banvard received no formal training. This was pragmatic. In a moving panorama, an audience would be watching the broad strokes pass by from a distance of at least several feet, so minute detail was unnecessary. However, in 1848, Joseph Kyle and Jacob Dallas conceived of a new panorama that would raise the bar for artistic quality in popular art.

Joseph Kyle, Jacob Dallas, and Edward Harrison May began designing and composing the panorama in 1848. They also solicited ambitious designs from well regarded artists with academic connections to the Hudson River School of landscape

painting, and this was not lost on contemporary reviewers. One reviewer for the *Home Journal* was allowed a glimpse before the mid-November 1850 opening. Writing in October, the reviewer came away impressed by the Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress: "We are gratified to be able to state the art of Panoramic Painting is likely to be most creditably illustrated among us...From the specimens we have seen, we predict eminent success from this enterprise. The designs are excellent, and the figures elaborately finished, while the finest effects have been realized from the large scale of the picture" ("Fine Arts").

As the review predicted, the Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress was a critical and commercial success. When an average run for a panorama in New York City would be somewhere between six and eight weeks (Hardiman 17), Pilgrim's Progress stayed open for over six months, grossing over \$100,000 (14). Perhaps inevitably, the panorama went on tour not long after, and was seen by paying customers from Charleston to Boston in several tours through 1867. Moving panoramas were frequently successful largely because of the novelty—the form provided the viewer with all the components of storytelling that would later be adapted to the medium of film. But this fact invites an important question: why—in an era of panoramas of whaling voyages, European cities, frontier landscapes—was Pilgrim's Progress singularly successful? The quality explains the critical success, but the commercial success of this panorama far exceeded all of its contemporaries. Perhaps surprisingly, Bunyan's Calvinist narrative remained compelling to audiences even in the forward-thinking (and religiously heterodox) 1850s.

Of course, Bunyan was very appealing to New England's earliest English settlers. Outside of the Bible, no single book had the impact on early America that John Bunyan's

*Pilgrim's Progress* had (Johnson 3). Bunyan's American readership has been well documented. As Galen K. Johnson notes, "It was one of only seven books excepting the Bible, almanacs, and reference manuals to sell more than 1,000 copies in America by the year 1690" (3). While critics like David E. Smith argue that Bunyan's popularity fell off in the 1820s, Kevin J. Avery seems correct when he says that *Pilgrim's Progress* "probably never had a wider readership in America than in the decades of the 1830s and 1840s...[it] stood next to the Bible as a foundation stone of [Americans'] faith" (238). It appears that, while new editions were not being released with the same frequency as they had been earlier, Bunyan's actual readership experienced little decline.

In fact, American writers throughout the 1840s made use of *Pilgrim's Progress* tropes for various purposes: entertainment, abolition, temperance, and political campaigns.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the most traditional reception of *Pilgrim's Progress*, however, was devotional and didactic. Avery writes, "Before the closing on 29 April, seventeen ministers, including Cheever, Gorham D. Abbott, and Henry Ward Beecher offered a testimonial to the picture, citing its 'peculiar claims upon the patronage of Christians of all denominations'" (245). This trend continued as the panorama toured the eastern and southern United States. One reviewer for Boston's *Christian Watchman and Reflector* wrote in June of 1851, "Bunyan's...story has been a favorite with nearly all religious denominations...This book has been read by millions, and will continue to be read with increased eagerness and delight. Where then could be found a more appropriate subject for the artist who has at heart the happiness of man?" ("Panorama of the Pilgrim's

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<sup>48</sup> Galen K. Johnson offers a fascinating study of this in "*The Pilgrim's Progress* in the History of American Discourse." Perhaps most interesting is the frequent use political cartoonists made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Progress”). The reviewer closes, “We advise all who have not yet seen the panorama, to do so at the first opportunity, as it will soon leave the city.” Notices like this continued through each of the panorama’s tours through the 1860s. Clearly, the expectation of reviewers was that those who viewed the panorama would take away Christian lessons--this viewing was, indeed, a devotional exercise. With that being said, no one was advising the viewers to take away specific, prescribed lessons. Instead, in keeping with Calvinist tradition, viewers were left to do the work of a Christian--namely, to create their own interpretation of the visual text.

Just before its appearance in Lowell, MA, the *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* published an editorial that anticipated the coming panorama: “Our readers may be assured that this exhibition is of a very high order, and carries with it, wherever it goes, the warm influence of the pulpit and the high encomiums of the press” (“Bunyan’s Pilgrim”). The Philadelphia-based *Arthur’s Home Magazine* published a review in June of 1862, proclaiming, “To see this, makes a life-long memory of beauty. One is borne into a land of enchantment, and vision after vision of grace and beauty rises before the rapt eyes” (“Panorama of John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress”). Again, however, this praise is not simply because of the execution by the painters, for “What child has not bent enchanted over the wonderful pages of the Pilgrim’s Progress--who has not been soothed and strengthened by its teachings?” As late as 1877, Wheeling, VA’s *Wheeling Daily Register* was praising the still-touring panorama, saying, “No more interesting and instructive entertainment has ever been given in the city” (“Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress”).

One thread that has run through all of these reviews (and there are countless others from Amherst, NH to New Orleans) is the “gratifying” and “instructive” nature of the viewers’ experience. Indeed, Tom Hardiman is right to say, “It would be difficult to imagine any work of art today that could meet the demands and interests of as broad a spectrum of viewers as those who filled gas-lit halls to see the Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress and left feeling utterly satisfied” (22). The few critics and historians who have written about this panorama in the last thirty years have stressed the popularity and the aesthetic gratification that the panorama generated. While this is clearly true, the crowds of paying customers were not merely seeking entertainment--or even beauty--primarily. Instead, they were seeking an “instructive” experience of art, one that they would find spiritually edifying. That is, the experience was to be a mixture of sacred and secular sublimity, resulting in the revelation of religious truths to the viewer. As we will see with the two known ekphrastic poems about this panorama, the Bunyan Tableaux (as the work later became known) became more of a religious icon than a popular masterpiece.

### **Jones Very and the Moving Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress**

Among the panorama’s visitors was a deeply devotional poet, Jones Very, who had long been concerned with the aesthetic and spiritual aspects of pilgrimage. One year before Kyle and Dallas began creating the Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress, Very published a sonnet in the *Christian Register* entitled “The Pilgrim”:

Twas in the winter at the close of day,  
The snow fell deep upon the traveller’s path,  
I met one journeying on infirm and grey,  
Yet seemed he not to heed the tempest’s wrath;

And oft a citizen would ask him in  
 And set him down beside him at his board,  
 But soon his weary march would he begin,  
 As if he felt not by the food restored;  
 I wondering, asked him why he tarried not  
 To taste the cheer that was so freely given,  
 And why the sheltering roof he had forgot;  
 He nothing said, but pointed up to heaven;--  
 And then I knew the food they gave away,  
 And home they offered were but for a day.<sup>49</sup>

As with many of Jones Very's sonnets, the speaker here receives a transformative spiritual realization after the volta--in this case, as a result of his encounter with the pilgrim. Although the aged "traveller" is "infirm and grey," he is unaffected by the present "tempest's wrath," "weary" though he may be. There is a timeless power inherent in the pilgrim's trek--environment, hunger, even friendship are disregarded as he marches toward his eternal destiny. Through this journey, he has become himself a religious icon—more like a panorama figure than a man in the flesh. He is now a recognizable symbol that would be familiar to an appreciative audience. This wordless pilgrim, with merely a gesture toward the sky, is able to offer religious wisdom to an observing audience. Much like religious painting itself, the pilgrim uses nonverbal, visual signs for spiritual instruction.

The pilgrim was a uniquely potent motif in American culture at this time. One reason that such a large number of *Pilgrim's Progress* editions were being published in the early nineteenth century is that the pilgrimage (and, therefore, John Bunyan's text) was inextricably insinuated in the American creation myth. As Cyclone Covey writes in *The American Pilgrimage: The Roots of American History, Religion, and Culture*, "The

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<sup>49</sup> Helen R. Deese notes that manuscripts for this poem exist that date back to 1841 (Very 635).

forging of the basic American tradition occurred largely at the hands of people whose orienting world-view and fierce motivation was that of a symbolic pilgrimage through the wilderness of this world to an ultimate home town in the next” (7). If the Greeks and Romans had the prototypical wandering heroes as their founders, the United States had the pilgrim. John Winthrop, Ann Bradstreet, Roger Williams, Increase Mather, on through William Penn, Jonathan Edwards, and Emily Dickinson all made use of the pilgrim motif.<sup>50</sup> Although the ubiquity of this myth would wane slightly in the twentieth century, Very’s “grey” and “weary” pilgrim stands as more than a source of religious instruction. Certainly, for the Puritans, the pilgrim figure embodied religious virtue. By the nineteenth century, however, this icon was more suggestive, protean, and nationalistic.

From March 7-26, 1859, the Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress was shown in Salem, MA, where Jones Very most likely experienced it for himself (Deese 590). His response came in the form of a sonnet entitled “On the Bunyan Tableau”:

Behold, O Christian! to the life displayed  
 The pilgrim’s progress through this evil world;  
 The many foes by which he is delayed,  
 Apollyon’s fiery darts against him hurled,  
 The vain allurements of the city spread  
 Like fowler’s net to take him in their snare,  
 Its riches and its pomps, to which are wed  
 The souls of men; the castle of Despair  
 With dungeon deep, and Error’s fatal hill.  
 And friends behold, who help the pilgrim here,  
 And arm him ‘gainst his foes with heavenly skill;  
 Fair visions too his fainting spirit cheer,

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<sup>50</sup> Cyclone Covey traces this succinctly in his brief book from 1961. In her 1999 work *The Pilgrims and Pocahontas*, Ann Uhry Abrams examines the early Pilgrims as a cultural myth in antebellum America, although she does not connect this to Bunyan’s work. It is my opinion that these two are certainly related, and the subject begs for a more exhaustive treatment.



The land of Beulah, and the city bright  
To which he goes, revealed to human sight!

Immediately, a reader familiar with personae from Very's sonnets will recognize the sermonistic tone of the opening line. Very begins with the voice of a prophet, crying, "Behold, O Christian!" to draw his auditors' attention to the poet's pulpit—a move we will later observe Whittier make in his poem "The Panorama." "Christian," here, functions syntactically as both the subject of the painting and the auditor whom Very is commanding. This, along with the un-capitalized "pilgrim's progress" serves to universalize the journey of Bunyan's protagonist through "this evil world." What follows is an episodic description of the panorama (or *Pilgrim's Progress* itself, since, aside from the title, there are no indications that these are visual, rather than literary, summaries). Typically, Very combines the Elizabethan and the Petrarchan sonnet styles, using the former's rhyme scheme and the latter's bifurcated format, hinging on the Volta after line 8.<sup>51</sup> Here, however, there is no change in direction until the ninth line, when the speaker commands, "And friends behold, who help the pilgrim here," reminding the auditor of the speaker's preacherly presence. The sonnet form is especially fitting in this ekphrastic poem—just as Dallas and Kyle appropriate a secular form for religious ends, so the poet has used a form with secular origins for devotional purposes.

The final five lines comfort the listener, shifting the focus from Christian's dangers (and, by extension, the listener's) to the aid available for the struggling pilgrim--friends who "arm him 'gainst his foes with heavenly skill;/ Fair visions too his fainting spirit cheer." Most inspiring to the Christian, however, is "The land of Beulah, and the city bright/ To which he goes." As in Bunyan's allegory, the vision of this city has the

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<sup>51</sup> Quintessential examples are Very's 1838 sonnets "The Dead" and "The New Birth."

potential to invigorate the weary pilgrim once it is “revealed to human sight!”. If the vision of the city itself strengthens a struggling Christian, so too will this panorama edify and enliven struggling Christians. As Beulah was revealed to Christian, so is Bunyan’s Tableau revealed to the potential viewer. Indeed, this is how it was frequently described in the press. The *Evangelist* reported that “The whole is well worth seeing, both for its artistic merit and its salutary influence on the mind” (*Descriptive Catalogue* 44). Similarly, a reviewer for the *Evening Post* recommended it to “families and schools as an entertainment which they will find at once instructive and pleasing” (44). The *Home Journal* described it as “thought-awakening,” and the *Presbyterian* predicted that people of all demographics “will admire it, and derive real gratification and improvement from its study” (45-46). The panorama was a religious, rather than solely aesthetic experience--and, indeed, part of Very’s project as a poet was to fuse these two viewer/reader responses.

Very’s ekphrastic sonnet, then, reflects how many contemporary viewers experienced the panorama--namely, as they would an iconic object of meditation. This fits with Very’s aesthetics. Very wrote his early poetry to convert his readers using beauty as an avenue for spiritual persuasion. In fact, as Edwin Gittleman records in his biography *Jones Very: The Effective Years, 1833-1840*, when Elizabeth Peabody told Very that she enjoyed reading his poetry, “he smiled and said that unless they were thought beautiful because they also heard ‘the Voice’ of the Holy Spirit while reading them, ‘they would be of no avail’” (261). Very also included in a letter to Bronson Alcott a sonnet, so that “you should leave all which hinders the Spirit of God from creating you again in his image” (278), writing after it, “You have now the good tidings of great joy,

and I hope they are such to you” (279). Now, this was during Very’s period of illumination (or psychosis, depending on the biographer), which happened late in 1838. “On the Bunyan Tableau” was written over twenty years later, but Very maintained his belief that the mind and the soul could be fundamentally transformed by depictions of beauty.

In an 1855 sermon, Very writes, “Where we cannot drive evil at once from the mind, we may yet turn our thoughts to its opposite, fixing them, so that they may naturally dwell upon what is good, & true, & pure, & lovely...until our minds become imbued with their nature, and our lives take their form and hue” (“Selected Sermons” 27). Later in this sermon, Very explains how this occurs:

The associations we form with things pleasant & cheerful sink deep into our souls and are ever recalled with pleasure & improvement. It was the advice of a celebrated painter to his friend, to fill his mind with images of beauty and make it as it were their home. There were both philosophy & religion in this advice. The thoughts of what is true, & beautiful, & good, if entertained until they have become familiar guests in the soul, will exclude all evil, and be ever ready, like the cherubim and the flaming sword placed at the entrance of the garden of Eden, to keep the way of the tree of life (30).

It is no wonder, then, that Very calls upon his reader to “Behold” the beautiful panorama, since, like the reviewers in local newspapers and journals, Very saw the “instructive”--even conversive--potential of the tableau. Interestingly, while reviewers made a point to discuss the quality of the painting in its own right, Very entirely avoids representing this piece of art as anything other than a religious object. At the same time, by urging people to take the “form and hue” of goodness, truth, and beauty, he is imbuing religiosity with a degree of aesthetic power that recalls the (often secular) art of painting.

### Elizabeth Fries Ellet

The cultural impact of the panorama was widespread, inspiring at least one other (very different) poet. If Jones Very is known primarily for his religious sonnets, Elizabeth Fries Ellet is most famous for writing the first history of women during the American Revolution. Her 1845 work *The Women of the American Revolution* was an ambitious work in which she displayed the important role individual women played in the history of the Revolution. Not only did this book draw substantially positive reviews from men and women alike, but she also laid the groundwork for future women historians. Scott E. Casper writes in his article “An Uneasy Marriage of Sentiment and Scholarship: Elizabeth F. Ellet and the Domestic Origins of American Women’s History” that Ellet’s work “challenged the male understanding of history from within, employing the methods and ideology of historical scholarship from the vantage point of the domestic” (10). In doing so, “Ellet sought to redefine not only how the past was told but also who told it” (11).<sup>52</sup> She applied this lens to recovering the history of women artists in a substantial history entitled *Women Artists In All Ages and Countries*. Despite her geographical and ideological distance from Jones Very, however, Ellet too framed the panorama (and by extension, her poem) as a form of spiritual experience—teaching viewers how to see by teaching them how to read the visual text. In this way, her poem transforms the aesthetic experience of viewing the panorama into a spiritual exercise.

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<sup>52</sup> Ellet is a frustrating writer for 21st century feminist critics, however, given her subscription to the nineteenth-century “cult of true womanhood” (as outlined by Sandra L. Langer in her 1981 review of Ellet’s *Women Artists In All Ages and Countries*). With that being said, while she may have overtly subscribed to the cult of true womanhood, Ellet’s impressive scholarly output displayed what, verbally, she may have denied.

Ellet's considerable education made her uniquely qualified for this work. Over the course of forty years, she published translations of works from French, Italian, and German with significant skill. In 1837, an excerpt from *Mrs. Hale's Lady's Book* included in *Oasis* (a monthly magazine out of Oswego, NY) reported that "It is only about four years since she was known as a writer, and already her fame is established as a poet of much talent" (36). As Casper writes, "By 1840 she...had written several volumes of poems, stories and criticism" (12). In numerous journals, including *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book* and *The New Yorker*, Ellet contributed a large number of poems, biographies, editorials, reviews, translations, and short stories. An 1847 biographical sketch in *Godey's* describes Ellet as "one of the most accomplished of our American writers...In criticism and poetry she has few equals, no superiors among our native writers. In fiction she exhibits a character of originality and elegance all her own" (60). In fact, Ellet's ekphrastic sonnet about the Pilgrim's Progress Panorama was used to advertise it to readers illustrates, which illustrates just how popular she was at the time.

In her fiction and nonfiction, Ellet devoted a great deal of ink to advocating for the importance of the individual artist, which may explain her engagement with the lone "pilgrim" figure of the panorama. Not only did she publish semi-fictional episodes of famous artists' lives, but her historical work *Women Artists In All Ages and Countries* "marked an important event in the history of art and women's studies" (Langer 55). In much of her short fiction, Ellet displays the struggles faced by individuals who devote their lives to art. She offers a cautionary tale in "The Fate of the Gifted," published in *Godey's* in 1840. In this brief story, a genius art student can find no one to patronize his painting--in the end, he dies a pauper. Ellet concludes, "Thus perished, in the blossom of

his genius, a victim of neglect, and of a too ardent imagination, an artist who, with proper cultivation, might have become the Canova of Great Britain” (109). If there is a moral for the story, it is that we need to take care of our artists. It is no surprise, then, that Ellet took an active concern in contemporary art, even to the point of writing an “impromptu” sonnet and allowing it to be used for advertising the Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress.

Ellet’s ekphrastic sonnet first shows up in the *New York Evangelist* on January 30 of 1851. By this time, the Pilgrim’s Progress panorama had been open for just over two months. As a preface to the sonnet itself, the unnamed editor writes, “The following beautiful lines by Mrs. Ellet, one of our most accomplished female writers, was written after a visit to this panorama” (18). When the panorama toured in 1859, Ellet’s sonnet was recycled to commend the panorama to potential viewers in Charleston. In the *Charleston Mercury* from December 2, 1859, the editor introduces the sonnet by saying, “In advance of the exhibition, we subjoin the following impromptu sonnet of Mrs. Ellet, well known in this community<sup>53</sup>, written after witnessing the panorama” (2). Outside of the indentation of the final couplet,<sup>54</sup> there were no changes to the sonnet between these two newspaper appearances:

Those mystic scenes with deepest meaning fraught,  
                   By Genius imaged in his hour of might--  
 A frame-work each for high and earnest thought--  
                   Here live and move before the wondering sight!  
 The walk by self-denying holy Faith,  
                   With sin and hell--the stern, victorious strife,  
 The solemn entrance at the Gate of Death,  
                   The pathway leading to Immortal Life--  
 All pictured here, do shadow truth sublime;

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<sup>53</sup> Ellet lived in Charleston in the 1830s.

<sup>54</sup> Here, I am using the indentation of the 1851 version. In the 1859 printing of the poem, the final line is not indented. Even the capitalization of “In” in line 10 is repeated in the second version.

Truth to be hid and cherished In the heart  
 Through every period of Earth's changeful time;  
 Oh, happy union! where the Painter's art  
 To Poetry its powerful aid has given  
 To bid us hear the message sent from heaven!

Immediately, the scenes observed by the speaker are “mystic...with deepest meaning fraught.” That is, the images are saturated with religious meaning, to “live and move before the [viewer's] wondering sight!” In a reference to Acts 17,<sup>55</sup> Ellet ties the scenes in the panorama to the Holy Spirit, as though the panorama itself is a force of God. The viewer has no choice but to see the panorama as a spiritual experience. Unlike Very, Ellet does not rely on the volta--instead, the majority of her sonnet is descriptive rather than dramatic. The “Truth” offered by the artists is one that must be “hid and cherished In the heart” for all time. The truth, however, is as much that of Bunyan as it is of the artists. In fact, outside of the final quatrain, this sonnet could be equally descriptive of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as it is of the panorama itself. It is not until the speaker acknowledges that “the Painter's art/ To Poetry its powerful aid has given” that we are reminded that this is the panorama, rather than the ubiquitous allegory. However, the goal of the panorama is not aesthesis, but a power “To bid us hear the message sent from heaven.” The “powerful aid” given to Bunyan's poetry is overshadowed by the spiritual significance behind the Pilgrim's Progress panorama.

Like Very's “On the Bunyan Tableau,” Ellet's sonnet looks beyond the physical panorama of Pilgrim's Progress. Instead of focusing on individual segments of the moving panorama, the poets appear to use the paintings as an avenue for discussing the spiritual significance of Bunyan's work. For Very, the viewer will see the importance of

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<sup>55</sup> “For in him **we live, and move**, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (17:28 KJV).

spiritual sustenance and visual inspiration. For Ellet, the private experience of “truth sublime” bids the spiritual seeker to “hear the message sent from heaven.” In fact, outside of a couple vague references to the panorama itself, the poems transform the panorama back into a primarily verbal text. Even these visual references to the panorama—“The solemn entrance at the Gate of Death,/ The pathway leading to Immortal Life”—have dubious analogues to the panorama itself. The surviving scenes do not contain clear referents to these descriptions, so that we must take her word that she visited the panorama at all. The images themselves are inconsequential in comparison to the spiritual lessons they impart to the audience.

### **Ekphrasis and American Iconography**

James A. Heffernan writes in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* that ekphrastic poems are “dynamic and obstetric; [they] typically deliver *from* the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus [make] explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication” (5). Given the ubiquity of *Pilgrim’s Progress* in antebellum American culture, the moments depicted in the panorama are certainly “pregnant” with meaning. However, this ekphrastic moment is complicated by the inverted ekphrastic maneuver of the panoramic artists themselves. The artists who created the Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress had a unique mission: to illustrate one of the most popular pieces of prose at the time, while engaging iconic images that would be recognized and appreciated by the public. In his essay “The Panorama’s Progress: The History of Kyle & Dallas’s Moving Panorama,” Tom Hardiman contextualizes the artwork in this way:



The religious revival of the early nineteenth century led to dozens of illustrated editions of *Pilgrim's Progress* in England and America. The engravings in these books were generally copies, with minor variations, of archetypical images of specific passages from Bunyan in earlier editions, especially those of Thomas Stothard in 1788. As artists, May and Kyle wanted to execute unique compositions, but as illustrators, they needed to show their audience images that were familiar and recognizable. (17)

The artists behind the Pilgrim's Progress Panorama were walking a fine line--engaging visual, cultural tropes while attempting to display artistic ingenuity. This was a central problem for Christian romantics—namely, the simultaneous pressure to be faithful to biblical truth while also expressing individual genius.<sup>56</sup> It was not only the story itself that was ubiquitous in nineteenth-century America, but also the illustrations themselves. The artists made use of these visual

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<sup>56</sup> This is a tension that religious artists still struggle with. As the contemporary songwriter David Bazan writes in his song "Selling Advertising," "I know it's hard to be original/ In fact nothing scares me more/ Because Jesus only lets me do/ What has been done before."



Fig. 2. *The Fight With Apollyon*. Image reprinted with permission from The Saco Museum, Saco, ME, 2015. C.f. Jones Very's description: "Apollyon's fiery darts against him hurled"

tropes, and (successfully, apparently) made reference to these popular illustrated editions of Bunyan's work while innovating in their panorama.

What is on display here is an avalanche of images that had already become recognizable. In successive editions, *Pilgrim's Progress* illustrators had built on previous depictions of fictional characters until, through time, readers came to see Christian's, Apollyon's, and Christina's identity in the visual traits created by the illustrators. Therefore, these episodes of *Pilgrim's Progress* had reached the level of myth and icon. As Roland Barthes writes in *Mythologies*, "Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all

the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance” (110). Certainly, the ekphrastic sonnets of Ellet and Very look beyond the specific, pictorial representations in front of them. I say beyond, rather than “through,” because the cultural and religious saturation of the imagery appears to forbid them from describing the images themselves. But this is equally true of the visual artists, as well. In antebellum America, a painter could not simply paint scenes from John Bunyan’s work, imagined afresh from his own idiosyncratic reading of the text. By necessity, this innovative piece of art had to build on images already popular with Bunyan’s readers (which, of course, included the artists themselves).



Fig. 3. *The Land of Beulah*. Reprinted with permission from the Saco Museum, Saco, ME, 2015. Cf. Jones Very’s description: “The land of Beulah, and the city bright/ To which he goes, revealed to human sight!”

While the panorama is situated in myth, the painted scenes participate in the iconology of American culture during the 1850s. In his 1986 work *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, W.J.T. Mitchell writes, “Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures ‘made in the image’ of a creator, to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image” (9). The mechanism of the moving panorama was uniquely suited for an American audience who was still creating its own identity as an assortment of pilgrims attempting to “make themselves and their world in their own image.”

Critics like Heffernan and Mitchell have argued that ekphrasis is a struggle for dominance between image and word, “the war-torn border between image and text” (Mitchell 154). This struggle is ongoing, Mitchell argues: “The dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself” (43). If this is the case, then Very and Ellet show us that the image and the word are interdependent. On the one hand, the word is subservient to the image. Both sonnets, in their way, advertise for the panorama. Ever the itinerant minister, Very depicts the panorama through the persona of a prophetic preacher, shouting “Behold!” to his listeners as he reveals the beautiful images, as Beulah was revealed to Christian. Ellet allows the editorial frame to commend the artwork, as her persona advocates for the spiritual edification the panorama can offer. But neither sonnet praises the panorama as a panorama. Instead, both poems look beyond the images toward the spiritual truths in Bunyan’s allegory. In this light, the panorama shows us that the image is subservient to

the written word, dependent as it is for its origin upon Bunyan's text. These ekphrastic poems show the tensions in such a dialectical, binary view of the relationship between word and image, however, as poems do not merely point toward *Pilgrim's Progress*, but beyond Bunyan's text, to the spiritual truths embedded in the story.

As early as 1852, one reviewer from the *The Barre Patriot* entitled a review of the panorama "The Grand Sacred Panorama of the Pilgrim's Progress." Already, the panorama had ascended into the realm of the sacred.<sup>57</sup> The image and the text had entwined to such a degree that the writer could say, "Connected with religious sympathies, this whole story, whether read on the page of Bunyan or on the equally attractive canvass, possesses a strong human interest, and wells up a thousand sympathies." The Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress, and the sonnets the panorama inspired, are cultural products situated at the tenuous intersection of literature, painting, the secular, and the sacred. Clearly, the panorama was not popular merely because skilled artists drew beautiful illustrations of exceptionally popular characters and scenes. The success was primarily due to the broadly held belief that individuals could--and should--seek spiritual improvement. Words and images may be necessary, but they are not sufficient. Spiritual progress could only occur when individuals were able to move beyond both images and words--the stuff of worldly pleasure--into a realm where neither was needed or relevant.

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<sup>57</sup> The *Pilgrim's Progress* panorama thus participated in a trend in the 1850s--namely, "Sacred Tableaux" that were designed to convey religious truth through aesthetic experience. One writer for *Appleton's Journal of Literature, Science and Art* quotes Emerson on this topic: "A good tableau needs no declamation," says Emerson...and the eloquence of a tableau is affirmed by the silence with which people look at it" (M.E.W.S. 595).

Kyle and Dallas's work toured through the 1870s, when it "became a sideshow attraction playing in southern Maine churches, meeting houses, and barns" (Hardiman 13). It was acquired by the York Institute in 1897, and forgotten for a hundred years. Digging through the basement of the museum a century later, employees found the work, measuring eight feet in height and 900 feet in length (13).<sup>58</sup> The surviving paintings are monuments to the ever-expanding spiritual imagination of the nineteenth-century American public, colossal reminders of the inextricable consanguinity of image, text, and religious devotion. The surviving ekphrastic sonnets are reminders of the sermonic role of nineteenth-century American poets, who mediated the religious experience of their readers.

### **Banvard's Moving Panorama in American Literature**

The tension between individual expressive genius and collective mythic iconography was explored and exploited by poets like Longfellow and Whittier, who moved beyond familiar texts such as *Pilgrim's Progress*. In their engagement with a visual text devoid of explicitly verbal and religious ties, these two poets molded Banvard's moving panorama of the Mississippi River to fit their respective literary, political, and spiritual ends. Dorothy Dondore describes "the pervasive and wide-spread influence which Banvard's mighty Mississippi Panorama exerted during the Flowering of New England" (826). Perhaps the most famous literary appropriation of Banvard's Panorama was by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his epic poem *Evangeline*, in which

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<sup>58</sup> The panorama is now held by the Saco Museum in Saco, Maine. They have shared a video tour on their website as well, with music and narration. This is how 1850s visitors would have experienced it, as the traveling panorama was accompanied by a lecture and, frequently, live music.

the Mississippi River serves as the backdrop for much of Evangeline's quest to find her beloved Gabriel. In his journal entry for December 17, 1846, Longfellow writes, "Finished this morning and copied the first canto of the second part of *Evangeline*. . . I see a panorama of the Mississippi advertised. This comes very *a propos*. The river comes to me instead of my going to the river; and as it is to flow through the pages of the poem, I look upon this as a special benediction" (Dondore 819). On December 19, Longfellow reflects on his visit to the panorama: "Went to see Banvard's moving diorama of the Mississippi. One seems to be sailing down the great stream, and sees the boats and the sand-banks crested with cottonwood, and the bayous by moonlight. Three miles of canvas and a great deal of merit" (821). As contemporary reviews show, the moving panorama greatly impressed nineteenth-century viewers—it was, after all, the ancestor of the motion picture. But the genre of moving panoramas also opened up possible political and spiritual vistas in poetry by helping readers visualize debates about what the land's value and meaning might be.

For Longfellow, this translated into the imagery he included in *Evangeline*. The poet narrates his heroine's journey down the Mississippi:

Onward o'er sunken sands, through a wilderness somber with forests,  
 Day after day they glided adown the turbulent river;  
 Night after night, by their blazing fires, encamped on its borders.  
 Now through rushing chutes, among green islands, where plumelike  
 Cotton-trees nodded their shadowy crests, they swept with the current,  
 Then emerged into broad lagoons, where silvery sand-bars  
 Lay in the stream, and along the wimpling waves of their margin,  
 Shining with snow-white plumes, large flocks of pelicans waded. (89)

In these descriptive passages, Longfellow also notes the "houses of planters, with negro-cabins and dove-cots" (89), a part of the landscape that appears as natural in his descriptions as the "towering and tenebrous boughs of the cypress" (90). By making use

of Banvard's panorama, Longfellow was able to improve the detail and accuracy of his imagery without needing to traverse the great river himself. Furthermore, Longfellow transposed the nationalism of Banvard's project onto his own attempt at creating a national epic.

Beyond providing the imagery for his epic, however, the panorama also provided an example for what American literature ought to be. In Longfellow's short novel *Kavanagh*, Mr. Hathaway pronounces, "[W]e want a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers,--commensurate with Niagara, and the Alleghanies [sic], and the Great Lakes... We want a national epic that shall correspond to the size of the country; that shall be to all other epics what Banvard's Panorama of the Mississippi is to all other paintings,--the largest in the world!" (754).<sup>59</sup> For Longfellow, as for many who visited the panorama, Banvard's painting was distinctly American in its sheer size, innovation, and connection with the American landscape.

A second publication that arose in response to Banvard's panorama was John Greenleaf Whittier's 1856 collection *The Panorama and Other Poems*. Although Whittier does not name Banvard particularly, Whittier's first description of the panorama fits what we know of the "Three Mile Picture." Furthermore, this opening description also illustrates what this panorama meant to a particularly American audience:

The curtain rose, disclosing wide and far  
A green land stretching to the evening star,  
Fair rivers, skirted by primeval trees  
And flowers hummed over by the desert bees,  
Marked by tall bluffs whose slopes of greenness show

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<sup>59</sup> In many ways, Hathaway provides a foil for Longfellow's *Kavanagh*, who criticizes this expansive (and anti-European) teleology for American literature. Nevertheless, this connection between the boundless American landscape and a development of American literature was a strain Longfellow felt compelled to address.



Fantastic outcrops of the rock below,--  
 The slow result of patient Nature's pains,  
 And plastic fingering of her sun and rains,--  
 Arch, tower, and gate, grotesquely windowed hall,  
 And long escarpment of half-crumbled wall,  
 Huger than those which, from steep hills of vine,  
 Stare through their loopholes on the travelled Rhine;  
 Suggesting vaguely to the gazer's mind  
 A fancy, idle as the prairie wind,  
 Of the land's dwellers in an age unguessed,--  
 The unsung Jotuns of the mystic West. (175)

The speaker is first struck by the sheer scale of the painting (“wide and far”), then by the scale and beauty of the American landscape itself, which “stretch[es] to the evening star.” Importantly, once the viewer has progressed from a focus on the panorama to a focus on the landscape, the next step is to compare the vastness of this landscape to the “travelled Rhine” and to relocate European mythology (in the form of the Norse giants, “Jotuns”) to the “mystic West.” In contrast to the ineffectual attempts at domestication—such as the “half-crumbled wall”—the land itself is limitless and timeless. The panorama, then, is a gateway to an experience of the American landscape whose fullness encompasses and surpasses the natural beauty of Europe.

This initial reaction is consistent with Banvard's stated goal of the panorama. In the biography published along with the 1862 description of Banvard's panorama, Banvard is painted as a young boy who “had heard, and now realized that America could boast the most picturesque and magnificent scenery in the world” (3). He subsequently “determined to paint a picture of the beautiful scenery of the Mississippi, which should be as superior to all others, in point of *size*, as that prodigious river is superior to the streamlets of Europe” (4). The ostensible purpose of this panorama was to bring the beauty of the American landscape to viewers who could otherwise not view it for

themselves. At the heart of this project, especially as it began its trek around the world, was to place the natural beauty of the United States on par with (even above) that of the classical European world. As Charles Dickens commented upon seeing the panorama in London, “This is history. Poor, untaught, wholly unassisted, [Banvard] conceives the idea—a truly American idea—of painting ‘the largest picture in the world’ . . . The upshot is, that it succeeds” (Oettermann 329). Dickens correctly predicted that it would become a worldwide phenomenon, as Oettermann writes: “Banvard claimed that four hundred thousand people saw his panorama in America alone. . . It is likely that he exceeded [this] during his tour of Europe. Following this tour, Banvard traveled extensively in Asia, Africa, and the Holy Land” (330). At home and abroad, the panorama was hugely successful. Back in the states, however, Banvard’s painting would also become a vehicle for the abolitionist poetics of John Greenleaf Whittier, which thereby complicated the nationalist functions of the art form.

While the land itself was impressive and majestic, Banvard’s depictions of the American South provided fodder for what was, according to one critic, Whittier’s “most important political poem.”<sup>60</sup> Whittier’s description of the viewing experience is consistent with what we know of Banvard’s touring exhibition—namely, the moving panorama unfolded before a seated audience, accompanied by a lecture from the artist. In London, this was the artist himself, as Dickens describes, “pointing out what he deems most worthy of notice. . . standing on a little platform by its side explaining it” (Oettermann 329). In Whittier’s poem, written in the wake of the “Bleeding-Kansas”-inspiring

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<sup>60</sup> David Grant outlines the political significance of this poem in his piece “ ‘The Unequal Sovereigns of a Slaveholding Land’: The North as Subject in Whittier’s ‘The Panorama.’ ” In this article, Grant explains how Whittier was attempting to unite several disparate strands within the antebellum Republican party’s platform.

Kansas-Nebraska Act, the speaker plays a more prominent role than the panorama itself, just as Whittier asserts his own romantic point of view.

This romantic point of view comes through most clearly in Whittier's "Showman." Moving beyond the mere descriptive role Banvard most likely played, Whittier's "Showman" unveils a panorama laden with prophecy:

I need no prophet's word, nor shapes that pass  
Like clouding shadows o'er a magic glass;  
For now, as ever, passionless and cold,  
Doth the dread angel of the future hold  
Evil and good before us, with no voice  
Or warning look to guide us in our choice  
With spectral hands outreaching through the gloom  
The shadowy contrasts of the coming doom.  
Transferred from these, it now remains to give  
The sun and shade of Fate's alternative. (176)

Rather than relying on a "prophet's word" or "a magic glass," the Showman relies on this new visual medium to reveal the respective consequences (both physical and metaphysical) of slavery and abolition. As a preacher unfolding a visual text before his congregation, the Showman unveils two potential outcomes for the nation. To depict a world in which slaves have been freed, the Showman reveals a landscape "Fair as God's garden. Broad on either hand/ The golden wheat-fields glimmered in the sun,/ And the tall maize its yellow tassels spun" (177). The fecund imagery here highlights the spiritual and economic yields a slave-free country can produce—enough to remind one of reentering the Garden of Eden. This, indeed, is a more Christian country, in which "well-paid labor counts his task a play./ And, grateful tokens of a Bible free,/ And the free Gospel of Humanity" abound (177). This is also a specifically multi-denominational religious country, as the various traditions are described as "diverse sects and differing names the shrines,/ One in their faith, whate'er their outward signs" (177). In this way,

abolition provides an avenue that will unite Christians as believers in “the free Gospel of Humanity.”

Like Dickens’s own fictitious ghosts, the Showman follows this vision with a country that currently relies on slave labor:

“Look,” said the Showman, sternly, as he rolled  
His curtain upward; “Fate’s reverse behold!”  
A village straggling in loose disarray  
Of vulgar newness, premature decay;  
A tavern, crazy with its whiskey brawls,  
With “*Slaves at Auction!*” garnishing its walls. (177)

Like Jones Very’s speaker in his ekphrastic poems, the Showman here commands his readers, “Look” and “behold!” With the voice of a preacher presenting a text to his congregation, the Showman reveals image of a slave-owning town. This town is characterized by economic and moral decline, as its citizens descend into drunken “whiskey brawls.” Unlike the previous edenic landscape, here the slave-holding village is characterized by “vulgar newness” and “premature decay,” as the town mirrors the spiritual corruption produced by slavery. This is spelled out more explicitly as the “shrewd-eyed salesman” “with a filthy jest,/ sell[s] the infant from its mother’s breast,/ Break[s] through all ties of wedlock, home, and kin,/ Yield[s] shrinking girlhood up to graybeard sin” (177). As Whittier’s panorama shows, slavery is intricately woven with the dissolution of the family unit and the propagation of unnatural sexual sin. Yet, this is all executed “With pious phrase and democratic cant.” Unlike the unity brought in by the “free Gospel of Humanity,” the Christian in a slave-owning land will “Sell all the virtues with his human stock,/ The Christian graces on his auction-bloc,/ And coolly count on shrewdest bargains driven/ In hearts regenerate, and in souls forgiven!” (177). In case the viewers have missed the point, the Showman cries out, “Look once again! The moving

canvas shows/ A slave plantation's slovenly repose,/ Where, in rude cabins rotting midst  
their weeds,/ The human chattel eats, and sleeps, and breeds" (177). In these lines,

Whittier echoes his earlier comments on anti-slavery in the 1833 pamphlet *Justice and Expediency*:

We are told of grass-grown streets—of crumbling mansions—of beggared  
planters and barren plantations—of fear from without—of terror within.  
The once fertile fields are wasted and tenantless, for the curse of  
Slavery—the improvidence of that labor whose hire has been kept back by  
fraud—has been there, poisoning the very earth beyond the reviving  
influence of the early and the later rain. A moral mildew mingles with and  
blasts the economy of nature. It is as if the finger of the everlasting God  
had written upon the soil of the slave-holder the language of His  
displeasure. (56)

More than twenty years removed from *Justice and Expediency*, Whittier transposes this  
dissolute image of the south onto his moving panorama, incorporating new media into his  
poetic, and political, enterprise.

In an immediate sense, the Showman uses the panorama to display the present-  
day reality of slavery, which the painting depicts as socially, sexually, and spiritually  
corrupting. Not only is slavery incompatible with Christianity as the Showman sees it,  
but it also reduces men, women, and children to livestock. In his final revelation of the  
visual text before the audience, the Showman proceeds to display the future of such a  
slave-holding nation as it spreads westward:

Still scenes like these the moving chart reveals.  
Up the long western steppes the blighting steals;  
Down the Pacific slope the evil Fate  
Glides like a shadow to the Golden Gate:  
From sea to sea the drear eclipse is thrown (178)

The political context of the Kansas-Nebraska Act weighs heavily on this poem, as the  
Showman reveals the dangers to the country if territories are permitted to choose slavery

over abolition. These dangers are not only economic and moral, but also ecological, as the virus-like institution invokes blight and “drear eclipse” stretching “From sea to sea.” As Whittier had written back in 1833, “Members of one Confederacy—children of one family—the cure and the shame—the sin against our brother, and the sin against our God—all, all the iniquity of Slavery which is revealed to man, and all which crieth in the ear, or is manifested to the eye of Jehovah, will assuredly be visited upon all our people” (*Justice and Expediency* 51).

For Whittier’s Showman, this is all contained within the panorama he presents to his audience—just as Banvard would have narrated his own panorama. Once the panorama has passed before the audience, the Showman shifts from describing a text to expounding a doctrine with evangelical fervor. In this way, he has entered the second stage of his sermon (of the traditional text/doctrine/uses structure):

The Showman stood  
 With drooping brow in sorrow’s attitude  
 One moment, then with sudden gesture shook  
 His loose hair back, and with the air and look  
 Of one who felt, beyond the narrow stage  
 And listening group, the presence of the age,  
 And heard the footsteps of the things to be,  
 Poured out his soul in earnest words and free. (178)

This description participates in common tropes surrounding contemporary evangelical preachers, as discussed in previous chapters. The Showman is isolated, with the audience noticing each theatrical gesture. As one who can both feel the “listening group, the presence of the age” and hear “the footsteps of the things to be,” the Showman serves as a conduit between the terrestrial and the spiritual—the temporal and the eternal. Therefore, he is able to help transport his audience from ignorance to enlightenment. To this end, he explicates the painting as it relates to his audience: “ ‘O friends!’ he said, ‘in this poor

trick of paint/ You see the semblance, incomplete and faint,/ Of the two-fronted Future,  
 which, today,/ Stands dim and silent, waiting in your way” (178). Clearly, this  
 “incomplete” panorama is the imperfect, concrete representation of this truth: slavery is a  
 “mad curse” leading the country to its own destruction.

The Showman moves quickly, however, to dispel any self-righteous sentiment among his Northern audience: “Why rail at fate? The mischief is your own./ Why hate your neighbor? Blame yourselves alone!” (178). As a preacher convicting his audience of their own sin, the Showman decries the pious Northerner who, unlike the “Southron,” may disagree with slavery, but lacks the courage of his own convictions. The Showman describes this man as “the mean traitor, breathing northern air,/ With nasal speech and puritanic hair” who “consecrates his baseness to the cause/ Of constitution, union, and the laws” (179). Inherent in this description is a disdain for any New England Puritanism that has yet to ally itself fully to the abolitionist cause. In Whittier’s poem, one cannot be Christian and pro-slavery. That is to say, one cannot be a Christian without being actively anti-slavery. Whittier had already expressed his disdain for New England self-righteousness in *Justice and Expediency* when he asked, “New England not responsible? Bound by the United States Constitution to protect the slave-holder in his sins, and yet not responsible? Joining hand with crime—covenanting with oppression—leaguering with pollution, and yet not responsible!...Why then should we stretch forth our hands toward our Southern brethren, and like the Pharisee thank God we are not like them?” (51). Over twenty years of political battles may not have changed Whittier’s views, but they certainly helped to sharpen his poetic voice as evidenced by the Showman’s sermonic speech.

For Whittier, it is not enough to agree with abolitionists. The Showman stands before the panorama, using his pulpit to reveal to his audience their complicity in slavery's perpetuation:

Men of the North! beneath your very eyes,  
By hearth and home, your real danger lies.  
Still day by day some hold of freedom falls,  
Through home-bred traitors fed within its walls.—  
Men whom yourselves with vote and purse sustain,  
At posts of honor, influence, and gain;  
The right of Slavery to your sons to teach,  
And “South-side” Gospels in your pulpits preach...  
What moral power within your grasp remains  
To stay the mischief on Nebraska's plains? (181)

This conviction is equally political and spiritual. The audience's sins come about through their political inertia, and as a result, they lack any moral authority in the debate surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act, let alone the authority to criticize southern slaveholders. If they are to earn this spiritual capital, they must “Cast out the traitors who infest the land,--/ From bar, press, pulpit, cast them everywhere” (182). Whittier's Showman calls his audience to political action, but also to patience:

Live, till the Southron, who, with all his faults  
Has manly instincts, in his pride revolts,  
Dashes from off him, midst the glad world's cheers,  
The hideous nightmare of his dream of years,  
And lifts, self-prompted, with his own right hand,  
The vile encumbrance from his glorious land! (182).

While the panorama initially served to highlight the superiority and uniqueness of the vast American landscape, here it is the site for an international embarrassment that can only be rectified through abolition. When the country finally abandons slavery, “The Eastern sea shall hush his waves to hear/ Pacific's surf-beat answer Freedom's cheer,/ And one long rolling fire of triumph run/ Between the sunrise and the sunset gun!” (182).



Here is the “uses” component of the Showman’s sermon, as he prescribes a specific course of action. As with slavery, abolition’s effects are as ecological as they are spiritual and political.

### **Ekphrasis and the Role of the Poet**

The frame of Whittier’s poem provides us with a model for reacting to the Showman’s sermon. The speaker who describes the Showman is an audience member, a poet struggling to report what he has seen: “With deeper coloring, with a sterner blast,/ Before my soul a voice and vision passed,/ Such as might Milton’s jarring trump require,/ Or glooms of Dante fringed with lurid fire” (183). The Showman’s presentation and explication of the panorama has reached the level of religious vision, and the speaker’s response is that of an awakening—both spiritual and political. In contrast to *The Moving Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress*, Whittier’s panorama calls for an act of conversion with direct political consequences. In this way, the panorama acts as a sacred text, one used by the preacherly Showman to effect perspectival change in his listeners. According to the final couplet, this has worked: “Forget the poet, but his warning heed,/ And shame his poor word with your nobler deed” (183). The Showman’s message has become the poet’s own. In this way, Whittier was able to reimagine the panorama in ways that challenged (rather than simply reinforcing) prevailing spiritual and political assumptions.

Jones Very, Elizabeth Fries Ellet, and John Greenleaf Whittier wrote about panoramas by asking readers to join them as active and interpretive viewers of an American landscape that served as the embodiment of nationalist and spiritual dilemmas facing the nation. While Very and Ellet moved beyond the panoramic images into the

spiritual truths contained therein, Whittier dwelled on the American landscape itself as a symbol for the uncertain spiritual destiny of the republic. All, however, were using the panorama as a site for sermonic discourse. As a novelty, and as an aesthetic experience, the panorama offered consumers a visual experience that heightened their spiritual practice. Very, Ellet, and Whittier employed sermonic poetics to guide readers through this aesthetic and religious experience.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ABNER KNEELAND AND THE DYING INFIDEL

The summer of 1838 was the peak of an *Annus Mirabilis* for religious turmoil in Boston. In June, Abner Kneeland began his sixty-day prison sentence for violating the 1782 Massachusetts Blasphemy Law. In July, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave his Address to the Harvard Divinity School. In August, Jones Very began to show the signs of madness that caused him to be forcibly committed to McLean Asylum one month later. Kneeland, Emerson, and Very were all attempting to navigate the perilous waters of heresy and piety in a New England stuck in a severe crisis of identity. Jones Very, on the one hand, crossed the perceived border between religious zeal and insane enthusiasm. Abner Kneeland, on the other, crossed the uncomfortable border between post-Puritan Unitarian rationalism and blasphemous Enlightenment skepticism. Of the three, Emerson, clearly navigated these waters most adeptly—Very and Kneeland, however, provide telling case studies of how religious ideologies could run afoul of the social contract and the law itself. While Jones Very's committal to McLean Asylum represented one threatening potential fate for Emerson, Kneeland's fate seemed even more plausible for a time. By looking closely at Kneeland's prosecution, we are able to understand more fully the religious forces at work in 1830s New England.

These two fringe figures mark the boundaries of what was acceptable at the time—but only Very's poetry could be appreciated by Transcendentalists, because only Very retained the spiritual dimensions (albeit in a distorted form) that remained important to most poets of the era. Kneeland's brand of heterodoxy, on the other hand, sent ripples throughout the publishing world in New England and the Midwest. These spiritual and

ideological struggles played out most interestingly in the popular poetry published in the periodicals during this time. In my discussion of this periodical poetry, I will look at poems that are, in the words of Paula Bennett in *Poets in the Public Sphere*, “instance[s] of speech whose expressive and mimetic power is organized explicitly or implicitly for argumentative ends—in order to achieve a practical discursive goal: persuasion” (5). That is to say, these poems are primarily polemical, and in reading them closely, we can see the role poetry played in the formation of Antebellum America’s cultural and religious identity.

### **Emerson’s Brave Saint**

In 1838, Jones Very was 25. He was a tutor in Greek at Harvard, and as a student at the Divinity School, was in attendance when Emerson gave his monumental Address. Sitting in the audience, Very heard Emerson proclaim, “Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil” (Emerson 75). Clearly, Very took this admonishment to heart, as he pursued a solitary, ascetic faith that resulted in his conviction that he had attained union with God. Before him, though, Very’s mother, Lydia, was known in Salem as a renowned heretic—a “coarse materialist” in her neighbors’ words, by which they meant she was “a proud, self-proclaimed atheist.”<sup>61</sup> Predictably, their Salem neighbors were not fond of Lydia, and soon they would be decrying her son as well, although for an excess of faith, rather than the lack of it.

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<sup>61</sup> Gittleman outlines the tempestuous relationship between Lydia Very and Salem society in his biography *Jones Very: The Effective Years* (4).

By August of 1838, there were rumblings among Very's students at Harvard—not only was his teaching style unconventional (this endeared him to his students), but he began telling his pupils that the end was nigh. As Very writes, “I was moved entirely by the Spirit within me to declare to all that the coming of Christ was at hand” (Deese lvii). Very's friends—especially those in the Transcendentalist circle—were strong allies of the talented (if puzzling) poet. Emerson, for one, considered himself a mentor to this young poet-prophet. In Benjamin Reiss's thorough study *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums & Nineteenth Century American Culture*, Reiss notes, “In Emerson's notebooks, he records impressions of a man who presented a dark mirror of his own thoughts, offering an almost apocalyptic vision of the institutions that transcendentalists were criticizing in a more hopeful mood: ‘His poison [Emerson writes] accuses society as much as society names it false & morbid, & much of his discourse concerning society, the church, & [Harvard] college was perfectly just” (120). So, Emerson himself may have recognized that Very was the transcendental poet he was calling for in the Divinity School Address. But there were other forces at work.

One of these forces was Charles Wentworth Upham. A Unitarian minister and future Whig senator, Upham was, as Reiss notes, “spoiling for a fight with Emerson since the publication of *Nature*, which he found to be an infidel text” (112). Upham, Salemite that he was, helped rouse the mob against Very, and subsequently against Emerson as well. Reiss writes that Upham “blamed [Emerson] for Very's collapse...[his] campaign to smear transcendentalists caught on: a number of letters among the literati around Boston repeated the idea that Very had been ‘blown up by Emerson’” (112). Under enormous pressure from the Unitarian forces in Boston, Emerson faced a difficult

decision: “To champion Very as the voice of sanity was to risk seeming mad himself; but to acknowledge his mental collapse was to risk being blamed for it. In pronouncing Very a genius but exercising a custodial role over his output that was in some ways akin to that of the asylum keepers, he chose an awkward middle road. The other transcendentalists, in one way or another, went down the same path” (Reiss 121). In another age, Very may have been celebrated as a visionary—like a prophet of old, he heard the voice of God and proclaimed his truth to the masses. But this was an awkward time in American history. Prophets abounded, but the community did not quite know what to do with them, since they conformed neither to traditional New England religion nor to anti-religious rationalism. Owenites, Millerites, Adventists, Shakers, Mormons would all crop up in the democratic, Jacksonian religious landscape, and all of them made the Boston elite extremely uncomfortable. So, Jones Very, an enthusiast possessed by the spirit of God, speaking as his Son, was dismissed as a madman—a studious zealot who needed some time to recover his wits.<sup>62</sup> People used Very to show the dangers of Transcendentalism, but Very was never framed as a serious threat. Very, like his Transcendentalist compatriots, undermined the establishment, but was not seen as destructive to the social order because he was still working within the Christian tradition. Frankly, Very could not unsettle his readers as fully as he wished. European-inspired religious skepticism, on the other hand—the kind endorsed and promoted by Abner Kneeland—was a different story.

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<sup>62</sup> As I discussed in the previous chapter, it seems unlikely that Very fully recovered. Instead, he served as an itinerant minister for decades following this outburst, successfully avoiding scandal until his eventual retirement.

### Satan's Hoary-Headed Apostle

In part because of his association with Jones Very, on the one hand, Emerson was being accused of unhealthy enthusiasm. On the other, and by the same Unitarians, Emerson was being attacked as an infidel. Mary Peabody (later Mary Peabody Mann), a close friend of Emerson's, was concerned. In a letter to her sister Elizabeth, Mary wrote, "if they could prove the charge of blasphemy against [Emerson], they would deprive him of his liberty as they had done to A[bn]er K[neeland]" (qtd. in Reiss 119). Emerson's friends had reason to be concerned. Unitarians like Charles Wentworth Upham, in conjunction with the Whig prosecutor Samuel Parker, were ready to make use of the controversial Massachusetts Act Against Blasphemy, passed in 1782. The Blasphemy Act stated,

*Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, That if any person shall willfully blaspheme the holy name of God, by denying, cursing, or contumeliously reproaching God, his creation, government, or final judging of the world, or by cursing, or reproaching Jesus Christ, or the Holy Ghost, or by cursing, or contumeliously reproaching the Holy Word of God, that is, the canonical scriptures, contained in the books of the Old and New Testaments, or by exposing them, or any part of them, to contempt and ridicule...every person so offending shall be punished by imprisonment not exceeding twelve months, by sitting in the pillory, by whipping, or by sitting on the gallows, with a rope about the neck, or binding to the good behavior, at the discretion of the Supreme Judicial Court before whom the conviction may be, according to the aggravation of the offence. (Kneeland 44)<sup>63</sup>*

By the letter of this statute, a number of violators lived in Boston at this time: Theodore Parker, George Ripley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among numerous others. But none of these men were prosecuted. As I will show, the decision to prosecute Abner Kneeland

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<sup>63</sup> Abner Kneeland published his own *An introduction to the Defence of Abner Kneeland, Charged With Blasphemy; Before the Municipal Court, in Boston, Mass* along with his attorney's *A Speech Delivered Before the Municipal Court of the City of Boston in Defence of Abner Kneeland on an Indictment for Blasphemy* in 1834.

illustrates the confluence of religious, social, and economic forces at work in 1830s Boston.

Abner Kneeland was, for many, an endearing old eccentric who published an esoteric periodical entitled the *Boston Investigator*. A former Baptist minister, then a Universalist cleric for twenty-five years, he was almost sixty years old when he was first tried under the Blasphemy Act in 1833. By this time, he was a self-proclaimed pantheist, but an atheist according to his accusers. Aside from being “the hoary-headed apostle of Satan,” he was known to his orthodox contemporaries, in the words of Leonard W. Levy, as “a cantankerous, inflexible heretic...an immoral being who had crawled forth from the darkness of the Stygian caves to menace Massachusetts” (Levy, “Satan’s Last Apostle” 16). He was a bogeyman for the Orthodox, but would become a martyr for freethinkers.

Ostensibly, Kneeland was tried for blasphemy because of three actions. An article reprinted in his *Boston Investigator* made a coarse reference to the Immaculate Conception while a second derided the efficacy of prayer. Although neither of these pieces was written by Kneeland himself, as the paper’s editor, he was held responsible. The third charge was based on a letter he sent to *The Trumpet*, a Universalist paper out of New York City, in which he differentiated himself from Universalists, with whom he was being associated at the time. In a letter addressed to Thomas Whittemore, editor of *The Trumpet*, Kneeland included four propositions:

Universalists believe in a god which I do not; but believe that their god...is nothing more than a chimera of their own imagination.  
 Universalists believe in Christ, which I do not; but believe that the whole story concerning him is as much a fable and fiction as that of the god Prometheus<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, in a text that would be scrutinized for its punctuation, the original article does not include periods at the end of the last three points.



Universalists believe in miracles, which I do not; but believe that every pretension to them is to be attributed to mere trick and imposture  
 Universalists believe in the resurrection of the dead, immortality and eternal life, which I do not; but believe that all life is material, that death is an eternal extinction of life (Levy ix)<sup>65</sup>

Since these were Kneeland's own words, they figured prominently in the prosecution.

Countless pages in the accounts of Kneeland's five trials focus on the grammar of these four declarations. Kneeland attempted to show that his omission of a comma after "god" in the first statement (in comparison with his use of a comma in the three following statements) indicated that he disbelieved in the Universalists' god, rather than in any god.

Unfortunately for Kneeland, however, his defenses based on grammar, constitutionality, and the conventions of satire did not sufficiently deflect the more fundamental charge.

As Samuel Parker argued in the first trial, "The general principle is, that the law will restrain and punish all open and public attacks upon religion, upon the authority of the Scriptures and upon the Founder of Christianity, because the belief in religion, so construed, constitutes the only binding obligation among men, and its denial tends to the subversion of all law and order in society" (Levy, *Blasphemy in Massachusetts* 185).

Kneeland was not being tried because he published these particularly objectionable statements in his paper. Rather, as Robert Burkholder writes, "for nearly a decade, [Kneeland] had stabbed at the vitals of Boston conservatism by publishing his essentially pantheistic views on religion, advancing the social theories of Robert Dale Owen and Fanny Wright, supporting the work of Dr. Charles Knowlton in educating the public about birth control, disseminating the Rationalism of Voltaire and Paine, and championing the causes of Jacksonian democracy and the working class" (4).

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<sup>65</sup> Leonard W. Levy compiled an outstanding compendium of sources surrounding the multiple trials of Abner Kneeland in his *Blasphemy in Massachusetts*.

In his detailed study “Skepticism and Faith: Infidels, Converts, and Religious Doubt in the Early Nineteenth Century,” Christopher Gassa points out the precarious position religious denominations faced in 1830: “While the Standing Order to tax-supported churches in Massachusetts was fracturing from within as Unitarian and Trinitarian Congregationalists fought over church property, an increasing number of religious sects competed for adherents in Boston and rural areas alike” (484). Within this context, Boston faced a growing population of working city-dwellers, and “To the rich and powerful, and to the clergymen who spoke for them, these new workers, and the new, more class-conscious urban culture they helped create, threatened social and moral order” (484). Kneeland dangerously “combined anticlericalism and reform politics” in an effort to foment a movement that threatened Boston’s entire social hierarchy. The 1782 Blasphemy Act provided a convenient means of silencing the “hoary-headed apostle of Satan” who was striking at the root of the social order.

By the time of his first trial in 1834, Abner Kneeland had, indeed, become a threatening force in Boston’s battle for hearts and minds. Within his first year of publishing the *Boston Investigator* (1831), the paper claimed almost 1000 subscribers and 56 agents working in nine states (French 208). As Roderick S. French explains, in 1836, Kneeland was “printing 3,000 copies per week, which were distributed by over 200 agents in this country and Canada” (208).<sup>66</sup> Weekly, he lectured to packed halls filled with his First Society of Free Enquirers. His Society hosted weekly co-ed ballroom

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<sup>66</sup> “Liberation from Man and God in Boston: Abner Kneeland’s Free-Thought Campaign 1830-1839,” published in *American Quarterly* 32.2 (1980).

dances, and his lecture circuit included most of New England.<sup>67</sup> As French argues, “In a relatively short time it was necessary to regard Kneeland’s movement not as something confined to Boston but as at least a New England phenomenon” (210). Kneeland’s crime, then, was not so much offensive critiques of religion—after all, there were a number of “free thought” periodicals in the 1830s<sup>68</sup>--as it was his widespread campaign against organized religion.

As Samuel Ripley argued, “There have been other infidels—Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Volney, & c. but the works of those persons were read only by men of literary habits—necessarily a few—and to men of sound understanding they carried their antidote with them” (Levy 189). Unlike these works consumed by the elite, though, “here is a Journal, a Newspaper, cheap—and sent into a thousand families, &c. Where *one* man would be injured by Hume, Gibbon, or Volney, a thousand may be injured by this Newspaper so widely circulated, so easily read—so coarsely expressed—so industriously spread abroad” (190). In this accusation, Ripley betrays the clarity of the writing in Kneeland’s paper (connecting “easily read” with the phrase “coarsely expressed”). This is further evidence that Roderick S. French is correct in his assertion that Kneeland “conducted what amounted to a weekly national correspondence school in liberalism for members of society who are generally inaccessible to historians” (215). This also

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<sup>67</sup> Roderick S. French outlines this lecture circuit, and the massive cultural impact Kneeland exerted in the 1830s in “Kneeland’s Free-Thought Campaign.”

<sup>68</sup> Albert Post outlined the “Free thought” periodicals of this time in his oft-cited *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850*. Post writes, “During the period from 1825 to 1850 about twenty papers [in the United States] were dedicated to the destruction of Christianity and ‘superstition’; in addition, there were about one half this number in the German language. Many were ephemeral affairs barely lasting out the year which gave them birth, but several like the *Boston Investigator* and the *Beacon* lived more than a decade” (34).

illustrates why Jones Very—heterodox as he was—received the sentence he did. As someone who affected relatively few, he was only ordered to improve his own mental health. Kneeland’s offense required a much stiffer—and much more public—punishment.

At this point, it is worth noting that Emerson took to heart the respective fates of Very and Kneeland. Although Emerson’s friends displayed concern over the Transcendentalist’s apparently precarious position, Emerson soon learned that criticism can grow an audience. As Robert E. Burkholder writes, “Kneeland was, after all, lecturing to thousands every Sunday, and in all likelihood Emerson benefited from the curiosity the controversy had aroused about him and his views...For Emerson, forgiveness faded into success and eventually even an adoring acceptance by the same Boston that for a few months in 1838 he feared had written him off as one of the Democratic rabble” (14). Similarly, throughout the 1830s, Kneeland successfully cultivated his image as a persecuted Socrates, endearing himself to both the Jackson Democrats and the Transcendentalists.

Although Kneeland’s prosecution was panned by many in the Unitarian establishment, including the illustrious William Ellery Channing,<sup>69</sup> the orthodox and conservative establishment had good reason to attack Kneeland. Prosecutor Samuel Ripley outlined his logic throughout the multiple trials. The primary fear was that, without the restraints of religious piety, the social order would collapse, and the result

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<sup>69</sup> Not only did Dr. Channing personally write to Judge Lemuel Shaw (who was a close friend at the time and Melville’s father-in-law), but Channing’s name also headed a petition signed by 167 others, “including Parker, Emerson, Ripley, Garrison, and Alcott” (Levy 29). A counter-petition followed, but the end result was that Kneeland was made to serve his sixty-day term, which he did with dignity.

would be a renewal of “the horrible experiment of republican and atheistical France” (Levy 214). One of Ripley’s most impassioned arguments details the ruin of society that would result from impiety:

Starting from this polluting fountain, I might trace the progress of vice and misery in a thousand narratives, beginning with the first disregard of the religious restraints of pious parents, the first distaste for devotional exercises, and follow the course of the incipient disease, and exhibit the stains and marks of the moral poison as it spread itself over the character and whole system of conduct and behaviour; the rapid steps from vile thoughts to vile actions, and the reaction and influence of a wicked life upon religious opinions; how infidelity towards God leads to infidelity towards man and woman, destroys domestic peace and harmony, breaks up marriages, blunts the natural feelings and affections between parents and children, and dissolves families. I might show the origin of fraud and crime in young men, of lewdness and prostitution in young women: first the wish that God could not see, and then the belief (cherished and fostered by the Julians and other apostates) that God does not see—that there is no God. (214)

Like ancient Rome and revolutionary France, Ripley’s atheistic America stands at the top of a slippery slope declining into a destruction of the American experiment—a precarious position that Kneeland was threatening to exacerbate. Kneeland’s *Boston Investigator* made no secret of its intentions. In the pages of the immensely popular periodical, writers denounced “Priestcraft,”<sup>70</sup> deconstructed miracles reported in the New Testament, and produced poetry that was severely critical of orthodox theological positions. The archives of the *Boston Investigator* read like the memoirs of an under-represented group experimenting with the boundaries of heresy and blasphemy. For readers, the

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<sup>70</sup> In the March 14 edition of 1834, for example, one Robert Taylor published a notice entitled “*BEWARE OF PRIESTCRAFT!!!*” In this article, Taylor decries priestcraft for “the old trick of making solemn faces, and telling dreadful stories about hell-fire, the devil, and raw heads and bloody bones coming to life again, to frighten women and children, and persons of weak nerves, or weak understandings; and telling you that you shall go to heaven if you believe and that you shall be eternally damned if you use your own reason” (4).

*Investigator* appears to be a form of Benedict Anderson’s description of newspapers as “one-day best-sellers,” with subscribers eagerly awaiting the latest communal reimagining of American religious culture: “fiction [and newspapers-as-fiction] seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (35). Kneeland’s periodical, then, provided a space in which subscribers could submit pieces for publication that would likely have been censured elsewhere—particularly, poems that explored the implications of religious skepticism. This process of publication united readers and subscribers through “community in anonymity,” as they were allowed to express solidarity in their religious skepticism and vent their frustrations as outnumbered nonbelievers in a largely religious culture. Since this communal activity took place in public, however, it also made Kneeland’s paper even more of a threat to the religious establishment.

### **The Boston Investigator**

The *Boston Investigator* produced myriad articles during the 1830s criticizing religious dogma, advocating for labor rights and abolition, and spreading the word about Dr. Charles Knowlton’s theories about birth control. However, the paper also published a number of heterodox poems as part of its quest to “improve the condition of man” (French 205). For example, the April 5, 1833 issue included a poem entitled “The Doubting On’t,” ostensibly submitted by the writer’s brother, L.S.:

[These lines] were written about a dozen years since, by a female, who has been confined to her bed nearly 30 years, and whose afflictions have contributed to create, not only the doubts expressed in her verses, but also others, regarding the Omnipotence and mercy of a supposed Being, whose attributes are said to be

perfect—the possession of these attributes to an unlimited degree, being inconsistent with the afflictions which she and others endured, and which must of necessity be included in the works that are ascribed to him.

As we will see in the orthodox Christian responses to these poems, the origin story is an important framing device for the polemical poem. In this case, the narrative frames the poem as an honest and sincere expression of religious doubt as a result of attempting to believe correctly in the face of a difficult life. By advising that the lyrics be set to the “Tune—Wee Pickle Tow,” the contributor associates the poem with a traditional Scottish folk melody (which it fits well) and an eighteenth-century Scottish poem by Alexander Ross.<sup>71</sup>

“The Doubting On’t” details a believer attempting to reconcile her faith with her experience, although unsuccessfully. Alternately, she blames herself, God, and theologians for the doubt she confronts. On the one hand, “Tho once like a Christian I frequently prayed/ And often was praising and shouting on’t;/ I now am so stupid, so dull, and so dead,/ That daily, and hourly, I’m doubting on’t.” Although her religious experiences felt authentic and convincing at the time, “I doubt the impressions that I us’d to feel,/ And fear they all sprung from delusion and zeal.” In this sense, her current state of doubt undermines her belief in herself. While she “know[s] that my heart is as hard as a stone,/ And that of true religion I now enjoy none,” she hypothesizes, “For if ‘twas religion that God did reveal,/ I think he would keep me from doubting on’t.” The speaker feels betrayed by herself, abandoned by God, and unconvinced by religious discourse: “I doubt that the Bible which we so much prize,/ Was given by true inspiration on’t;/ I

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<sup>71</sup> Ross’s poem similarly ends every other line with “o’t,” and is also about a woman stuck at home wrestling to better her situation (see J. Ross’s *The Book of Scottish Poems Ancient and Modern*).

doubt whether any, tho' ever so wise,/ E'er gave us the right explanation on't." If the speaker could either shake herself out of her doubt, or receive the proper aid from God or his messengers, she appears ready to have her doubt settled once and for all. For other subscribers attempting to reconcile their religious belief with personal experience and scientific discoveries, this speaker cuts a sympathetic figure.

One strain in this poem is the sincere questioning of religious belief, but there is also a playful subversiveness in some of the speaker's musings:

If I could KNOW there's a Heaven or Hell,  
As well as I KNOW, that I KNOW I can't tell,  
I think that I know, I should know it so well,  
That I ne'er should be doubting on't.  
But if there is truth in these Heavenly things,  
Then why should the Lord keep concealing on't;  
If knowledge of Truth much felicity brings,  
I wish he'd to me be revealing on't.

The speaker plays with "know" throughout these stanzas, undermining the certainty she purportedly seeks, even indicting God for refusing to "be revealing on't." Yet, she admits, "This world, I imagine, could not have been made/ Without having had a Creator on't;/ Because all around, such design is displayed." Kneeland was sure to include a footnote after this stanza, lest his readers be too consoled in their own religious doubts: "The apparent effect of design in nature, is no more proof of a previous designer than the supposed existence of that previous designer is a proof of a still prior designer who designed that designer, and so on AD INFINITUM—Editor." The *Investigator* was a space for the exploration of doubt, but Kneeland, in the context of his "correspondence school in liberalism," wanted to ensure his readers were reasoning carefully.

Another contribution by "A SUBSCRIBER" was published in the December 13, 1833 issue of the *Investigator*. Unlike the speaker of "The Doubting On't," this



contributor begins in a less self-deprecatory way: “In early life I went to school,/ To gather knowledge from a fool,/ Who (senseless dolt,) no reason knew why,/ One had a black, and one a blue eye.” This contributor addresses theological questions more directly—especially concerning the Fall and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. He wonders about “The snake that courted *granny* Eve” and questions why the first sin “Brought us into a *curs’d* condition” when “God himself, ordain’d the sin/ Which could not otherwise have been.” The tone turns more polemical when the poet expands his critique of Calvinism:

That God from all eternity  
By his immutable decree,  
Selected some of Adam’s race,  
Recipients of his partial grace;  
From crimes atrocious call’d or driven,  
And dragg’d by violence to heaven,  
While far the greater part remain  
Predestin’d to eternal pain...  
To make such dogmas reconcil’d  
Would puzzle any common child.  
I therefore, while my faith was sprouting,  
Began to doubt, and still am doubting.

The poet offers a passionate critique of Calvinism, but unlike “The Doubting On’t,” the poem ends by arguing that God “both merciful and just is,/ And will not plunge our souls in wo,/ For crimes five thousand years ago.” By concluding the poem in this manner, the readers are left with an affirmation of divinity that is more Arminian than it is pantheistic (which Kneeland claims to have believed) or atheistic.

The poetry published in the *Investigator* offered a venue for expressing sincere doubts in religious doctrine and polemically denouncing religious authority. One such poem by a contributor who called himself “Bard of the Whirlwind,” was reprinted from the *Ohio Watchman* on August 28, 1835. The poem, which is entitled “Thoughts On

Priestcraft,<sup>72</sup> opens by equating priests who “declare” with the theologians who “prate,” and “strive to make mankind their easy tools” by sending “their missionaries far and wide,/To teach mankind their open faults to hide.” For the “Bard of the Whirlwind,” priests (employed here as a general term for religious authority in the tradition of D’holbach, Voltaire, and Paine<sup>73</sup>) appear as selfish dogmatists who are not only misleading their believing parishioners, but also, “By such illusions they would gain,/ And make all men their interest sustain.” The goal of this poet is not just to deconstruct religious belief. Rather, the focus is on the inherent self-interest of the religious establishment. The poem closes by wrapping up its critique of priests: “Thus, they assert those things which can’t be true,/ To fright mankind *their* interests to pursue./ Their only motive is the Jove of ease,/ Of grandeur, power, and just themselves to please.” In these lines, the poet employs the tropes of “Freethought” writers like Voltaire. This is no surprise, since Kneeland published Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary* as the “Free Enquirer’s Family Bible,” complete with blank pages to record births, deaths, and marriages (French 216).

Another poet, whose untitled and unsigned poem was published in the September 11, 1835 issue of *Boston Investigator*, continued this polemic against priesthood. The poet opens by proclaiming, “Of all the things on earth the very worst/ Are foolish dogmas, and the cursed thirst/ Of priests for cash.” Beyond taking tithes—and,

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<sup>72</sup> Poems cited in this chapter can be found in their entirety in the appendix.

<sup>73</sup> Baron D’holbach’s *Good Sense Without God or Freethoughts Opposed to Natural Ideas*, D’holbach writes, “The more we consider the dogmas and principles of religion, the more we shall be convinced, that their sole object is the advantage of tyrants and priests, without regard to that of societies” (69). Voltaire differentiates between the wheat and the chaff in his *Philosophical Dictionary*: “When a priest says: ‘Worship god, be just, indulgent, compassionate’, then he is a very good doctor. When he says: ‘Believe me or you will be burned’, he is a murderer” (346-47).

importantly, taking money from the government—priests need to be watched carefully, “Or they’ll get all our cash, if not our eyes;/ And having done, they’ll tell us to our face,/ ‘Poor fallen man! you surely have no grace.’” In this warning, the relationship between priest and believer is caricatured as a criminal transaction, in which the parishioner is left empty-handed and unredeemed. This is, in part, a warning against church collections and tax support for churches. This poet’s concern, however, is also with what a believer loses in religious devotion:

Let man but know that reason’s brilliant ray  
 Alone will guide him through life’s devious way;  
 But in exchanging sight for priestly faith,  
 He undergoes a certain mental death:  
 Let him reject their slavish hopes and fears,  
 And know that death will end his only cares,  
 And think no more of worlds beyond the grave,  
 And he will cease to be a cringing slave.

Here, the conversion process is deconstructed, and the typical redemption narrative is reversed. Rather than a sinner being reborn, redeemed from the bondage of sin, this conversion process is “a certain mental death,” in which the liberal mind is captured and distorted into “a cringing slave.” For this poet, the unbelieving rationalist had two options—one, to undergo this “mental death,” or two, “if you flinch, and have no fears of hell,/ They set you down a wicked Infidel:/And if you don’t submit and pay their fees,/ They doom to hell as many as they please.” Although other newspapers (even those within the fold of orthodoxy) criticized certain types of priestly excess, Kneeland’s *Boston Investigator* was almost unique in its inclusion of this open skepticism. As we

will see, the poet's description of being "set...down a wicked Infidel" was a rather public process.<sup>74</sup>

### The Converting Infidel

To be "set...down a wicked Infidel" was to invite fear and scorn. One particularly troubling depiction of an infidel seems to have circulated widely. Re-published in the Episcopalian periodical *Chronicle of the Church* on February 2, 1838, a story entitled "The Infidel's Dying Child: A Fact," was originally written for the *Western Presbyterian*. In this narrative, a "disciple of Hume, Bolingbroke, Voltaire, and Paine" had a daughter who had "taken violently ill." Although this twenty-year-old woman sought the death-bed consolation of Christianity, this father "in the most furious manner...ordered [her friends] to leave the room, and threatened to *whip* the *daughter*, lying on her *death-bed*, if she so much as mentioned the subject again." Although he finally relented on the morning of her death, it was too late: "before the minister came, she had *gone to eternity*, with all her fearful anxiety! During four days she begged most earnestly for some one to read her the Bible, or show her the way of life; but her *father*—yes, her FATHER!!! would not suffer it. O! the tender mercies of infidelity!" The father in this story is the embodiment of pious fears: infidels not only damn themselves, but in their stubborn arrogance, they also damn other souls to hell.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The *Ohio Watchman* was another, and, as Albert Post details, there were a number of freethought newspapers in Boston and New York. What made Kneeland's paper unique were its longevity and its comparatively enormous readership.

<sup>75</sup> While the narrator here fears the power an infidel father may have over his family, it is worth noting that infidels, for their part, also feared the power religious wives had over their husbands. As Post notes, "[Gilbert] Vale blamed the female sex for rejecting his periodical and free enquiry. '...wives,' he bitterly declared, 'are the great drawback,'

In the early nineteenth century, the term “infidel” carried a number of religious and racial connotations. While typically applied to non-believers, state prosecutor Samuel Ripley used the term in Abner Kneeland’s trial to conjure images of sexual misconduct.<sup>76</sup> In a poem called “The Infidel” by Moses H. Perkins for the *Western Recorder*, a Baptist newspaper operating out of Louisville, the poet describes the unfortunate plight of a member of “savage bands” on “Afrio’s dreary shore.” Although the danger of the African landscape is certainly concerning to the speaker of the poem, the final stanza spells out a more substantial fear:

No shepherd’s moans, nor panther’s roar,  
Nor wreck, nor corse upon the shore,  
    To me much pain has given,  
As seeing on the couch of death,  
The infidel resign his breath,  
    *Without a hope of Heaven!*

This infidel is to be pitied not only because his surroundings are wild and uncivilized, but primarily because he is consigned to death without salvation. An infidel—whether foreign or domestic—is to be pitied, then, because he has no consolation in death. That

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dictating, as they did, to their husbands on what to read, and the latter to avoid domestic brawls, abandoned their wives to improper clerical influences. The only way to remedy this evil, Vale believed, was by extending the sphere of education to women and so breaking the grip of the clergy on their minds” (51).

<sup>76</sup> Ripley argued before the court, “and who, if not checked in the mad career of folly and infidelity, will consider your verdict of acquittal...as an unlimited charter and license to him...Do you wish to see the Boston Investigator in every family, such obscenity and impiety in the hands of your wives, your sons and daughters? If so, shut up your meeting-houses and churches, and go to Julien Hall, where all the mysteries of infidelity will be developed to you: for though it can tolerate no mysteries in religion, yet, if it is not much belied, like the BONA DEA in Rome, it has the peculiar mysteries of its own, secrets made known to those who no longer fear God” (Levy 214). As Leonard Levy points out, Ripley tended to avoid directly associating Kneeland with sexual impropriety, but continually hinted as much in his argumentation. Associating Kneeland’s lectures with the *Bona Dea* in Rome is an apt illustration of the underlying accusation of hedonistic and sexual excess.

is, he will be consigned to hell for eternity. It was this fear that fueled so many foreign missions and domestic revivals. It is also an intriguing characteristic of religious discourse surrounding infidelity, as infidels were to be viewed with pity and concern rather than just scorn. Unsurprisingly, then, a number of Christian periodicals published articles depicting infidels converting to Christianity.

Throughout the 1830s, this trope dominated public discussions of religious skepticism. Christopher Grasso notes the publication of a pamphlet entitled *The Conversion of an Infidel*, which was widely circulated in 1830s Boston (486). Although this narrative was told differently in various media, the standard formula included a dying (or aging) religious skeptic finally turning to the Christian faith and choosing to reform his life. The trope of the converted infidel was borrowed so frequently and broadly—in Boston and across the Midwest and the South—that it appears ubiquitous. In fact, by December 16 of 1840, the *Boston Investigator* published an article that claimed, “There is no subject more continually harped upon than this. Every ecclesigogue [sic] and every lyric poetaster endeavor to pluck a feather from poor humanity to adorn their brow and to advance the cause of superstition.” As the exasperated writer described, the narrative of a converting infidel was certainly popular among pamphleteers, but it was just as prevalent among poetry circulated in newspapers across the U.S. in the 1830s.

One noteworthy poem, also entitled “The Infidel,” was originally published in *The Cleveland Observer* on May 3, 1838. This poem details a student’s conversion to infidelity, an inversion of the conversion process in traditional conversion narratives. A “pale” student, sitting by a “midnight lamp,” writes what turns out to be a damning statement:

His pen  
 Was ready dipt, and wavered  
 With impatient motion to  
 Perform his bidding. He wrote, [sic]  
 While o'er his face, there pass'd a  
 Withering anger: "There is no heaven  
 Nor hell, perchance no God,"—  
 "I know not, nor little care."

Here is a vague summary of a number of free-thought writers at the time—namely, a denial of the afterlife, and a non-committal comment about the existence of God. During the first days after this act of writing, not much changed: "He went forth/With his accustom'd smiles" and "reason seem'd to hold/Without dispute her high,/ Imperial throne." However, after "Day followed/ Day," "A change came o'er the youth."

Namely,

He seldom smil'd, or spoke;  
 Sneer chased sneer, from off his  
 Curling lip: --gloom cloth'd him  
 With her chilly mantle: wild  
 Chaos thron'd himself, where  
 Once bright reason sat—

After the student allows "bright reason" to sit where faith belongs, his mental life turns to "Chaos," and "gloom" wraps herself around him. What follows is a loss of love for all of humanity and an inability to appreciate the beauty of nature:

He hated all mankind; and with  
 Them curs'd himself; light seem'd  
 Darkness to his eyes; the green  
 Fields, and singing birds, he lived  
 Not, the words of friendship,  
 Were molten lava to his soul

Like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the student here undergoes a conversion to evil, in which he can no longer appreciate the beauty of nature or the love of friendship. This Satanic conversion, predictably, ends with the student's self destruction:

Upon life's stormy sea, he soon  
 Is left a cheerless wreck; helmless  
 He drives: no guiding star to cheer  
 Him on: no port to draw his feelings  
 Forth. All, all, is one wide,  
 Cheerless waste; --he gnaw'd his  
 Tongue; and in the prime of manhood,  
 Reeling, plung'd into a drunkard's  
 Grave, and with hot curses on  
 His lips, rush'd to the judgment bar.

The student's fate becomes that of the drunkard in *The Drunkard's Progress*. This is a common connection for orthodox writers during this time—namely, infidelity and excess. As Samuel Ripley argued in his case against Kneeland, “The religious and moral sense of the people of this happy land is the great anchor, which alone can hold safe the vessel of State in the mighty current of human affairs...and if the mass of the people were debauched from the principles of religion, which are the true basis of that humanity, charity, moral sense and benevolence...the prostration of our excellent Constitution and laws would soon follow” (Levy 192). The student in this poem embodies the fears of those like Ripley who viewed religion as the great dam holding back the rapids of moral and social decline. If a young mind feeds on the poisonous fruits of infidelity, it will, like Thomas Paine, progress along the road of excess that leads to physical and spiritual ruin.

### **The Dying Infidel**

In the December 16, 1840 denunciation of “The Dying Infidel” (referenced above), Abner Kneeland's *Boston Investigator* decried the over-use of this trope among religious periodicals. Responding to a flurry of religious poems depicting the death of fearful and unredeemed non-believers, the writer argues,



What is a true, clear, and open-hearted statement of the case? Why, simply, that death itself is more or less terrible to all; that some diseases, determining on the brain, expose the hallucination, phantasm, monomania, frenzy; that the specialty of our faith does not change our common nature or our individual constitution; that there are good and bad Christians as well as Infidels; and that the dying experience of each, even in the most devoted, is not unfrequently [sic] directly the reverse of what the enthusiastic had anticipated.

Indeed, in the twenty years before this issue of the *Boston Investigator*, the trope of the dying infidel was well worn. From prosaic narratives of deathbed fears to poetic treatments of reason's failed consolations, the terrorized dying infidel was a popular figure throughout the 1820s and 1830s.

One widely circulated poem, "Dying Reflections of an Infidel," appeared in the *New York Evangelist* on January 10, 1835.<sup>77</sup> The speaker of this poem, presumably an infidel on his deathbed, wonders at what his imminent death is about to bring: "What shall I be—Where shall I go?/ I'd give a thousand worlds to know." Unbeliever that he is, this infidel turns to his rationalism in his time of need: "*Reason*, I choose thee for my guide,/ I heard thy voice and none beside,/ Come now decide the doubtful strife/ 'Twixt endless sleep and endless life." Interestingly, the speaker of this poem criticizes religious beliefs with a tone not dissimilar from common contemporary freethinkers:

If he regards our actions here,  
Why not revenge the oppressed tear,  
And crush the cruel and unjust,  
With pride and malice in the dust?—  
These thoughts an anxious doubt create,  
That this is not our final state,  
If there's a God, then who can tell,  
There may be heaven, there may be hell.

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<sup>77</sup> "Dying Reflections of an Infidel" appears to have been published initially by *The Pittsburgh Reader* on March 13, 1827. It was also reprinted in *Hopkinsian Magazine* in September of 1827; the *New York Evangelist* on January 10, 1835; and as late as the *New York Observer and Chronicle* of February 16, 1860.

The Bible doctrine *may* be right,  
 If so, I sink to endless night.  
 I *hate* that God which they declare,  
 His holiness is too severe.  
 I *hate* his law, which says I must  
 Be holy like him, or be curs'd.

Here is a common critique of the benevolence of an omnipotent and omniscient god who refuses to exact justice. Even within the infidel's critique, however, the poet displays an ostensible weakness by arguing that a god who does "revenge the oppressed tear" must do so "With pride and malice." Aside from this implicit criticism of the infidel's argument, the charge goes unanswered. Instead, Pascal's Wager hovers over the logic of this poem. Rather than refuting the infidel's logic, the poem relies on the safety of religious belief: "The Bible doctrine *may* be right,/ If so, I sink to endless night." The final four lines of this poem have the infidel comparing himself with a redeemed Christian believer: "Yet he must be more safe than I,/ And more prepared to live or die.-- /If I was right, still *he* is well;/ But if he's right—I sink to hell." The strategy in this widely circulated poem was not to argue with freethinking philosophers, but to show that faith is necessary for anyone facing their own death. Surely, this poem argues, death must be the ultimate test for an atheist's unbelief. This sentiment has survived to more contemporary times with the adage "There are no atheists in foxholes."

Many "Dying Infidel" poems critique rationalists for using "reason" to replace religious belief. Here, as in a number of other poems, reason fails to offer any consolation or understanding in the face of death:

Once I could laugh at what I feel,  
 And scorn the thought of heaven and hell,  
 But reason shines as clear as day,  
 Although my outward man decay;  
 Yea it may shine and never stop,

And misery fill my future cup—

Without religious consolation, the infidel is left without an adequate guide for navigating the afterlife. In this poem, though, enthroned reason also gives way to hatred. The speaker regrets that he “scorn’d the christian and his God,/ And trampled on his Savior’s blood,” images that link skepticism and violence. Beyond the spite imputed to a religious skeptic, there is also an implicit link between skepticism and vice: “I spurn’d at God, at Christ and hell,/ As names that priests and women tell,/ I gave the reins to sin and lust,/ Which hastened my return to dust.”

Haunting many of these poems is the image of a distressed, regretful, dying Thomas Paine. After his death in 1809, Christians and skeptics found themselves vying for the deceased infidel’s soul. During his life, tales of intemperance circulated throughout the states, thanks in no small part to James Cheetham’s 1817 biography. Rumors of Paine’s deathbed recantation of freethought principles also abounded, many of them persisting for several decades. One typical example of this narrative appears in the May 3, 1838 issue of *The Cleveland Observer*. The author, “L.S.,” opens by proclaiming, “miserable indeed is the life of an infidel. We might imagine that those who have adopted the opinions of anti-christian writers, would be ready to abandon their guides with horror and dismay, when they discovered them, at the approach of death, shrinking with the greatest possible terror from the prospect of futurity.” While all infidels must face this terror at the time of death, Thomas Paine in particular was especially frantic: “his mind was in the greatest agony of any person [a woman friend] ever saw...he was praying almost incessantly.” Upon hearing that his woman friend had never read his blasphemous works, Paine lamented, “If every-one had done so how much

better it would have been for my poor soul.” Paine even “declared, that if ever Satan had an emissary on earth, he was one. He acknowledged that he was a poor benighted creature, and just awakened to see his condition before he died.” Unfortunately, while Paine appears to have desperately wanted to convert, no one from the Society of Friends was available, and the “benighted creature” died unredeemed. Understandably, Abner Kneeland’s paper viewed these narratives as a desperate attempt to undermine Thomas Paine’s skeptical writings and published refutations of these accounts.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, it fell to Gilbert Vale, fellow freethinking publisher, to deconstruct the deathbed narratives most thoroughly in *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1840). Attempting to establish the truth of Paine’s final hours (in a section entitled “Mary Hinsdale’s Falsehoods”), Vale writes, “A few zealous pious hypocrites had determined on a conversion, or on a conviction and remorse, and therefore a woman was made a tool of to propagate such charges” (175). The fault did not primarily lie with Mary Hinsdale, but with those who were “base enough to publish her foolish [story]” especially one Charles Collins. Responding to details circulating in accounts like the ones published in *The Cleveland Observer* and *Boston Investigator*, Vale writes,

It is humiliating to be under the necessity of exposing such contemptible nonsense. Collins, if he was not the author, was assured of its falsity. But being *full of the spirit* of fanaticism and intolerance, and believing, no doubt, that the end sanctified the means, he continued to circulate the

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<sup>78</sup> One refutation was published on November 24, 1847, which included the full account of Catholic Bishop Fenwick, which was prefaced with the editorial comment, “The following account is again going the rounds of the press, as though it was ‘something new under the sun.’” The paper appends the narrative by using the apparent fabrication as a means of excoriating the Catholic Church: “Catholicism has more to atone for than would people a million of ‘Milton’s biggest hells,’ and if we had no American Bonzes to pamper, so small a lie as this respecting the ‘awful death of Thomas Paine’ would probably never have been hatched. When Rome lies, *nations* are the stakes she plays for.”

*pious fraud*, and the clergy exultingly retailed it from the pulpit. Nothing but religious phrensy could have induced Collins, after being warned of the crime he was committing, to persist in publishing this abominable trash. . . . Indeed, it was considered by the friends of Mr. Paine generally to be too contemptible to controvert. But as many *pious* people continue to believe, or pretend to believe in this stupid story, it was thought proper to say a few words upon it in this publication (176).

Even decades after Thomas Paine's death, the infidel's final days became a key battleground in the war for the hearts and minds of Jacksonian Americans. Certainly, much was at stake—if the freethinkers could die in peace, religious consolation may appear less valuable. If, however, religious writers could cast Thomas Paine in the traditional mold of the “Dying Infidel,” the freethought movement could lose one of their idols.<sup>79</sup> This is yet another reason why newspapers like Kneeland's *Boston Investigator* were crucial for secular thinkers and terrifying for pious Americans.

The spectre of Thomas Paine's death is foregrounded in a poem published on March 1, 1820 in *The Methodist Magazine*, entitled “Reflections on Passing the Grave of Thomas Paine.” Predictably, this poet focuses on Paine's ostensible terror of death:

When struggling nature heaves the parting sigh,  
 And hope and fear maintain a doubtful strife,  
 Why shrinks the firm philosopher to die?  
 Why clings the trembling infidel to life?  
 Oh, 'tis because his hope, forbid to soar  
 Beyond the grave's impenetrable gloom,  
 Beholds, when life's poor pilgrimage is o'er,  
 A dread annihilation in the tomb!

In contrast to “Dying Reflections of an Infidel,” the emphasis here is not on what the infidel has to fear from God in the afterlife, but on the undesirability of a skeptic's view of the afterlife. Since his materialism leads him to believe in “dread annihilation in the

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<sup>79</sup> It is worth noting that similar stories circulated after the passing of David Hume, Voltaire, and Charles Darwin.

tomb,” he approaches his imminent death with terror, “For who can plunge into a gulph unknown,/ A land of darkness, solitude, and shade!/ Leap from the crumbling brink of life alone,/ Nor feel the terrors that are round him spread.” Since he died “without a hope of heaven” and without having “sins forgiv’n,” “Oh then, indeed, ‘twas terrible to die,/ ‘Twas dreadful to resign the ling’ring breath;/ A keener anguish barbs the parting sigh,/ And horror hovers o’er the couch of death.” Consistent with the traditional charges against infidels, this poet links the skeptic’s hopelessness with vice:

Dark, wretched, gloomy was his mortal life,  
 A prey to passion, and to sense a slave  
 The hapless child of misery and strife,  
 Rests not in peace ev’n in his lonely grave.<sup>80</sup>  
 What deep emotion, in my bosom swells,  
 While I this melancholy spot survey;  
 On scenes long past, recording mem’ry dwells,  
 When I, like him, pursued the devious way.

As Samuel Parker would later argue, a lack of religious conviction leads to moral dissolution (as Paine was rumored to have suffered). This poet uses the demise of Thomas Paine as a cautionary tale for anyone who may be tempted to entertain religious skepticism—it leads to a miserable life devoted to vice and, eventually, no consolation in death. Here is the Thomas Paine depicted in *The Cleveland Observer*: “a poor benighted creature, and just awakened to see his conditions before he died.” Reflecting on this cautionary tale, the believer is grateful to have escaped this faithless fate: “Saviour, let all my future days be thine,/ To spread thy praise be all my sweet employ!/ And while I know that thou, my God, art mine,/ All toil is sweet, and every pain is joy.” While the

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<sup>80</sup> As the author footnotes, “Perhaps it is not generally known that the remains of T.P. have been lately removed from his solitary grave, and it is supposed sent to England.” While the eventual loss of Paine’s remains is a fascinating historical episode, the unsettled nature of Paine’s resting places was further proof that infidelity leads to displacement in the afterlife.

author of “Reflections on Passing the Grave of Thomas Paine” meditates on Paine’s fate as an avenue for reaffirming the poet’s own faith, other poets appear to have an arguably less charitable aim.

On October 16, 1826 the Hartford, CT newspaper *Christian Secretary* published a poem entitled “Death of an Infidel Philosopher.” This poem begins when the “Infidel Philosopher” has already died:

His spirit hath gone!  
It hath ventured alone  
On a dark and boundless sea;  
Its gloomy swell,  
Moaned like a knell,  
As it bore him thro’ dim eternity!

So far, this description is consistent with the “Dying Infidel” poems and narrative accounts we have already seen. Bereft of a hope for heaven, the philosopher’s soul “Moaned like a knell” as it began its journey on the “dark and boundless sea.” Already, though, we see a metaphysical assumption that the infidel’s soul is not simply annihilated upon death, but instead lives on and must undergo the trek into the afterlife reserved for infidels. As with most “Dying Infidel” poems, the infidel is derided for entrusting “reason” to perform the functions of religion:

Reason’s torch light  
Was quenched in night,  
When he left his house of clay;  
Oh he scorned and despised  
The blood of Christ,  
Which alone could guide his dreary way!

“Reason” again offers no answers once a soul has left its body. The speaker also finds an irony in the fact that the infidel “scorned and despised” the only belief system that can save him from his impending fate—two verbs that show up consistently throughout these

“Dying Infidel” poems. Less common among these poems (although not unprecedented) is the detailed account of the infidel’s afterlife. In the third stanza, the poet begins this description obliquely. The speaker commands the infidel philosopher to “Boom onward boom--/ Through the fearful gloom/ Of a cheerless and desolate night!” So far, this is similar to the grave’s “impenetrable gloom” that Thomas Paine’s post-death visitor noted. But this speaker commands the infidel to proceed beyond this darkness, “Till thy shuddering eye/ Far off shall descry/ A startling pomp of terrible light!” With this, the speaker begins to take the infidel beyond the fear of death discussed in other poems, beyond the darkness of a godless tomb, and into a rather specific destination.

Continuing with the imperatives, the speaker urges the deceased infidel to continue his infernal journey:

Come, spirit, come!  
 Receive thy doom—  
 A terrible trump hath pealed thy name!  
*Where* shalt thou fly  
 From that fearful eye,  
 Which has lit the universe into flame!

The inevitability of God’s will is not uncommon in these poems. Although the damnation described here goes further than other poems we have seen to this point, this seems a logical progression (or an implication made explicit) from the previous poems focused on the infidel’s fear of death. However, there is a playfulness in the command that opens this stanza: “Come, spirit, come!/ Receive thy doom--/A terrible trump hath pealed thy name.” This is an inversion of the rewards promised the devout believer, and the traditional psalmic request for the spirit of God is repurposed for calling an infidel to his punishment. This playfulness becomes more explicit in the final stanza:



There is music in hell!  
 They are chanting thy knell,  
 They are weaving a burning wreath for thee;  
 Wrapped in robes of fire  
 Is that fearful choir—  
 Go!—join their ghastly revelry!

The speaker appears to marvel at his own description of hell, unfolding each revelation as he witnesses and deciphers it. In another inversion of the heavenly choirs in biblical descriptions of heaven, the speaker describes the painful state of these infernal choristers. This inversion is remarkable not only in its Miltonic depiction of hell, but also in the extreme physical pain implied in these descriptions, as heads are wrapped in “burning wreath[s]” and fellow infidels are engulfed in “robes of fire.” The venom behind these descriptions becomes more explicit in the final lines of the poem: “On a throne of flame/  
 With hot diadem/ Curse, for ever, thy false philosophy.” So ends this poetic description of the recalcitrant infidel’s destiny.

Depictions of the unconverted infidel’s trek to hell were not uncommon. While the author of “Death of an Infidel Philosopher” appears to have taken the most pleasure in depicting the infidel’s punishment, his descriptions were not even the most elaborate. One poem “by an American jurist, and one of the vice presidents of the American Bible Society” was published in the April 7, 1837 edition of *Western Christian Advocate*. Also entitled “The Dying Infidel,” this poem commands us, “See on the bed of death (O doleful sight!)--/ An unbeliever in revealed truth.” As with all infidels, he had a “voluptuous life” filled with “vicious pleasures” and “Contemn’d religion—scorn’d its friends and forms--/Despis’d the sacred mysteries of faith--/Believing only what his *reason* taught.” All of these are familiar elements in the “Dying Infidel” tradition. This poet even recalls Jonathan Edwards: “Behold him now suspended by a thread/ Over

eternity's appalling gulf." Thomas Paine haunts this poem as well: "Tortur'd by pain— and shudd'ring at the view/ Of endless mis'ry bursting on his soul,/ In all the agonies of frantic dread/ The *unbeliever* takes his leave of life." What the infidel has to fear, though, is as specific as the fate described in "Death of an Infidel Philosopher." The speaker here laments,

Before him (O how chilling is the thought!)—  
 Not one faint gleam, of never-ending bliss,  
 Breaks on his soul—to cheer his dying hour.  
 A yawning gulf—a prison of despair—  
 Blackness of darkness—and the gnawing worm  
 That never dies—the' "interminable fire,"  
 Without one drop of water to allay  
 His raging thirst—or cool his parched tongue—  
 Infernal spirits in a world of woe,  
 His torment, while eternity endures—  
 O what a prospect at the close of life!

The physical pain described here is even more thorough than the previous depiction of hell, although this poet appears to lament, rather than celebrate, this damnation. Beyond the "robes of fire," this dying infidel faces "the gnawing worm" and an eternal "raging thirst"—certainly, miserable prospects for this infidel.

As the writer of an even more widely circulated poem entitled "The Dying Infidel,"<sup>81</sup> describes, however, this is the fate of all infidels. The author, R. Hoyt, describes the vision of hell as witnessed by, presumably, David Hume, to whom the epigraph "A leap I' the dark" is credited:

Now, light unearthly offers to mine eye  
 A blazing brink, --misshappen [sic] beings thence

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<sup>81</sup> This version was printed in *The Ohio Observer* on October 30, 1834. However, it was published previously in the *Religious Intelligencer* of August 30, 1834. The editor of *The Ohio Observer* attributes it to the *New York Baptist Repository*, with the preface, "Our readers, if they relish true poetry, will have a rich treat in the perusal of the following lines."

Fly up and screaming skim the dusky air,  
 Vultures impatient for their coming feast!  
 While pendant from on high, adown the gulf  
 Hangs the dire catalogue of all my guild,  
 My summons now, to everlasting death.

Hoyt's poem takes us beyond the individual suffering of an infidel philosopher, as Hume sees that "the dire catalogue of all my guild" must face a punishment originally devised for Prometheus—the excruciating attacks of "Vultures impatient for their coming feast!"

### **The Poetic Public Sphere**

For twenty-first century Americans, it may seem crass, even deplorable, to depict in gruesome detail the eternal damnation of another soul—whether it is with apparent regret or downright glee. Although this is a tradition that dates at least as far back as Dante's *Inferno*, there is an implicit schadenfreude that borders on disturbing in some of these poems. True or not, why should a non-believer's fear of death bring anyone consolation? How can a soul's horrific suffering in hell bring satisfaction to someone who purportedly believes in a merciful God?

Clifford Geertz's work is instructive here. In his study *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz defines a religion as "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (90). For a young country struggling to formulate an identity, the Christian "system of symbols," bound up as it was with the chosen national origin myths, appeared absolutely necessary if they were to live up to the vision of their Puritan forefathers. When this

“general order of existence” is threatened, the reaction is, predictably, pointed. As Geertz explains,

The thing we seem least able to tolerate is a threat to our powers of conception, a suggestion that our ability to create, grasp, and use symbols may fail us...Man depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creaturely viability and, as a result, his sensitivity to even the remotest indication that they may prove unable to cope with one or another aspect of experience raises within him the gravest sort of anxiety (99).

It is safe to say that the battle over souls in Jacksonian America bred a great deal of this “gravest sort of anxiety,” which often manifested as fear and spite. As Prosecutor Samuel Parker charged, Kneeland’s paper published poetry to continue to minister to the working classes on behalf of freethought. In Parker’s eyes, Kneeland was the figurehead for a nefarious movement striking at the root of a country’s entire moral foundation, an offense that deserved nothing short of imprisonment.

I would argue that there is yet another component to the disdain held by Samuel Parker and the religious elites in New England. Although there was already a tradition of anti-clerical and irreligious prose consumed by contemporary readers, these newspapers went further. Profane writers were also utilizing the poetic form to attack religious orthodoxy. Poetic form, which had been used for centuries as a means of meditation and devotional expression in the form of sacred verse, was now being used to evoke deconversions from orthodoxy. The readers of periodicals like the *Boston Investigator*, who often came from the lower classes, did not have the spiritual and educational fortifications to guard against this assault on orthodoxy. As a result, religious writers resorted to their own poetically conversive tactics to counter this secularist onslaught. When this did not seem to work, they tried to deconstruct the sacred idols of freethought—Hume, Voltaire, and Paine. Finally, they gloried in fantasizing about their foes’

deathbed terror and eternal damnation. Paine, especially, required at the very least a sort of exorcism for early Americans. Paine was a figurehead for the American Revolution, and since (for devout Christians) the republic was destined to be a Christian nation, his vocal religious skepticism was a betrayal. Eventually, Paine's contributions to the Revolution would overshadow his infidelity in later American culture, but during the 1830s, his criticisms of religion were a fresh wound.

If we define the "public sphere," with Habermas, as "a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion," then religious and anti-religious newspapers were essential organs in Jacksonian America's public sphere (50). At stake were not only the hearts and minds of the American public, but also, for those in the ideological struggle, the destiny of the republic. Was the country going to continue the religious legacy of the early Puritans, or would the influx of Enlightenment philosophy continue to influence public opinion? In their attempt to earn converts and rally their bases, all sides resorted to a tradition that predates the American experiment: conversive poetry.

**Appendix: Transcriptions of Cited Poetry**

“The Dying Infidel”

*The Ohio Observer*, 30 October 1834

Also appears in the *Religious Intelligencer*, 30 August 1834

“From the New York Baptist Repository. Our readers, if they relish true poetry, will have a rich treat in the perusal of the following lines”

THE DYING INFIDEL [a dramatic monologue]

“*A leap i' the dark.*” —Hume.

By R. Hoyt.

‘Tis even so!—the touchstone of all faith  
 I now must grapple, and abide that test  
 Which distant I derided, but come near,  
 Is wond’rous fearsome and discomforting.  
 My recreant philosophy hath turned the heel  
 And left my soul unarmed and desolate,—  
 Soul, did I say?—ha! [ba?] how the giddy brain  
 Is prone to muster up its old conceits,  
 And make me rave of things that never were.  
 There is a mystery within, I know,  
 That doth exalt this clod to man’s estate,  
 But this “forever” is a crafty tale  
 Which my dissolving nature now belies.  
 Then what is Death,—yet, sooth, I hate that word,  
 It hath a meaning that doth fellowship  
 With such unsavory thought,—to be pent up  
 In an unwindowed cell, and there forgot,  
 Go mouldering down to nothing, yielding forth  
 My fatness to enrich a church-yard soil!—  
 The veriest atom then e’er tasted life  
 Might scruple such an end,—yet be it so,—  
 While thousands, weary of this luckless race,  
 Do manfully foreleap its final bound,  
 Shall I shrink back, when my full course is run,  
 And dastardly for vain existence strive?—  
 No! speed your utmost now, ye dwindling sands,—  
 Death and Eternity,—I dare it all!

Hail Land of Shadows!—ye dread myriads hail!  
 Make room adown your chambers for a guest!—  
 Right valorous I tread,—but oh! ‘tis black,  
 Black as primeval night, and foul as Hell!  
 I wish, or almost wish, that some unasked,  
 Would offer me a light to guide me through.

I even would accept a Christian's hope,  
 Although fallacious—hist! I hear a step,—  
 Who comes!—it matters not, I'll speak it out,  
 Although fallacious, it would be a staff  
 To stay my tott'ring limbs till all were o'er.

Dark, horrid fancies thicken on my sense,  
 I hear that step again in close pursuit,  
 I see, or deem I see, the uncouth forms  
 Of fabled fiends stalk out.—and there's a voice  
 Deep muttering from beneath—Prepare! Prepare!  
 And from above there thunders on mine ear,  
 The hour, the hour is come! Wide yawn thou Depth,  
 Perdition's portal, for the unwashed soul.

Now, light unearthly offers to mine eye  
 A blazing brink, --misshappen [sic] beings thence  
 Fly up and screaming skim the dusky air,  
 Vultures impatient for their coming feast!  
 While pendant from on high, adown the gulf  
 Hangs the dire catalogue of all my guild,  
 My summons now, to everlasting death.

Beyond the cavern's neither [sic] verge, remote,  
 Ten thousand midnights roll their mingled gloom  
 In sullen pomp along a starless sky,  
 The lurid glare that gave the glimpse of hell,  
 Falls from my o'erstrained vision, and my feet  
 Do grope reluctant, yet constrained, along.  
 I cannot flee, these palsied, tott'ring limbs  
 Can succor me no more. This falt'ring tongue  
 Can call no rescue,—I must linger on—  
 I touch the precipice—and “LEAP THE DARK.”

“The Dying Infidel”

*Observer and Telegraph (Hudson, OH), 30 September 1830*

*For the Observer and Telegraph*

THE DYING INFIDEL

In the dark, sequester'd cell of vice,  
     Stretch'd on his wretched bed of straw,  
 Clad in robes of squalid poverty,  
     The daring, dying infidel I saw.

Beside him stood the intoxicating bowl,  
 And to quench his ever craving thirst,  
 The Rousseau took unnumber'd draughts,  
 Of poisoned draughts, the most accurst.

But mark his death, his final end,  
 His limbs convulsed with anguish,  
 And mostly hear him dying say,  
 "Oh God! in Hell I *fear* to languish."

Alas! the lamp of life has ceased to burn,  
 And all his boasted reasoning power,  
 With health, wealth, and vice allied,  
 Is but weak in dissolution's hour.  
 A.W.B.

"The Dying Infidel"

*Boston Recorder and Religious Telegraph*, 19 October 1827.

*From the Visitor and Telegraph*

THE DYING INFIDEL.

I have been happy—but in vain!  
 The pride of youth is o'er!  
 I ne'er shall taste its sweets again,  
 Its joys shall come no more!  
 My morn of life was bright and gay,  
 My noon as ocean's foam,  
 But that fair morn hath passed away—  
 My eve of sorrow's come!

That time hath been, when I was blest,  
 When my young heart was light;  
 When tides of bliss flow'd o'er my breast,  
 From morning e'en till night!  
 But now—Oh! Sad reverse of fate,  
 My life is nought but gloom!  
 Then, Priest, thy counsels are too late;  
 My hour of sorrow's come!

The death-bed call—the death-bed call:--  
 Its summons dread I hear—  
 Sternly and dark the echoes fall,  
 Upon my troubled ear!



I see dim forms—I hear a voice—  
 It speaks of fearful doom!  
 Hark! How the gathering fiends rejoice!  
 Away! they come! they come! C----

“The Dying Infidel”

*Western Christian Advocate*, 7 April 1837

Extract from an unpublished poem entitled, “The Bible Era,” by an American jurist, and one of the vice presidents of the American Bible Society.

#### THE DYING INFIDEL

See on the bed of death (O doleful sight!)—  
 An unbeliever in revealed truth.

He, through the course of a voluptuous life,  
 Contemn'd religion—scorn'd its friends and forms—  
 Despisd the sacred mysteries of faith—  
 Believing only what his *reason* taught,  
 Wealth, power, pleasure were his highest aim.  
 These are the *idol gods* to which he bow'd,  
 These, the vain phantoms, that seduc'd his heart  
 From real happiness, and heav'nly truth.

Behold him now suspended by a thread  
 Over eternity's appalling gulf.  
 With deep anxiety and awful dread  
 He looks on his surrounding—weeping friends,  
 And often asks, with horror and dismay,  
 If the physician's skill can't sooth his pains,  
 And for a while, reprieve him from the grave—  
 He asks in vain. The clammy dew of death—  
 The falt'ring tongue—the vacant—glassy eye—  
 The flutt'ring pulse, and cold extremities,  
 Too surely prove that moment just at hand,  
 When he must part with relatives and life,  
 Cheer'd by no hope of bliss beyond the tomb—  
 O'er his past life his retrospective glance  
 Searches for something to allay his fears.  
 Something on which his sinking hopes can rest.  
 Vainly he looks. There nothing meets his eye  
 To check despair and smooth the bed of death.  
 No works of faith or charity. No deeds  
 Done to advance the bless'd Redeemer's reign,  
 And thus promote the happiness of man—  
 No fixed reliance on atoning blood—

No hope of pardon through a Savior's [sic] death.

Before him (O how chilling is the thought!)—  
Not one faint gleam, of never-ending bliss,  
Breaks on his soul—to cheer his dying hour.

A yawning gulf—a prison of despair—  
Blackness of darkness—and the gnawing worm  
That never dies—th' "interminable fire,"  
Without one drop of water to allay  
His raging thirst—or cool his parched tongue—  
Infernal spirits in a world of woe,  
His torment, while eternity endures—  
O what a prospect at the close of life!

If he reverts to years already pass'd,  
What follies crimes, and errors rise to view—  
Time spent in vicious pleasures, or in scenes  
Of vain amusement—mercies much abus'd—  
A life of business—occupied with schemes  
For adding to enormous—useless, wealth.  
Nothing in all the retrospect of life  
Cheers his desponding heart with hope or peace—  
Had he the wealth of kingdoms at command,  
O with what transport, would he give it all  
But to redeem a part—a little part  
Of time so undervalu'd or misspent,  
To gain a short reprieve from instant death.  
Could he but purchase a few hours of ease,  
Believe—repent, and seal his peace with God—  
Then he could part with life without a pang.  
Vain wish! The awful sentence has gone forth,  
"Cut down that tree—why cumbereth it the ground."  
Already has avenging conscience seized—  
Like a devouring vulture on his heart,  
And all the horrors of approaching death  
Begun to agonize his shatter'd frame—  
Thus as if haunted by infernal fiends,  
Tortur'd by pain—and shudd'ring at the view  
Of endless mis'ry bursting on his soul,  
In all the agonies of frantic dread  
The *unbeliever* takes his leave of life.

"Death of an Infidel Philosopher"

*Christian Secretary*, 16 October 1826

## DEATH OF AN INFIDEL PHILOSOPHER

His spirit hath gone!  
 It hath ventured alone  
 On a dark and boundless sea;  
 Its gloomy swell,  
 Moaned like a knell,  
 As it bore him thro' dim eternity!

Reason's torch light  
 Was quenched in night,  
 When he left his house of clay;  
 Oh, he scorned and despised  
 The blood of Christ,  
 Which alone could guide his dreary way!

Boom onward, boom—  
 Through the fearful gloom  
 Of a cheerless and desolate night!  
 Till thy shuddering eye  
 Far off shall descry  
 A startling pomp of terrible light!

Come, spirit, come!  
 Receive thy doom—  
 A terrible trump hath pealed thy name!  
*Where* shalt thou fly  
 From that fearful eye,  
 Which has lit the universe into flame!

There is music in hell!  
 They are chanting thy knell,  
 They are weaving a burning wreath for thee;  
 Wrapped in robes of fire  
 Is that fearful choir—  
 Go!—join their ghastly revelry!  
 On a throne of flame  
 With hot diadem  
 Curse, for ever, thy false philosophy!

\*By a son of the late Rev. Samuel Warren, LL.D. of Glasgow, Scotland.

“Dying Reflections of an Infidel”  
*New York Evangelist*, 10 January 1835

Also appears in *Hopkinsian Magazine*, September 1827  
*New York Observer and Chronicle*, 16 February 1860  
*The Pittsburgh Reader*, 13 March 1827

By Request

DYING REFLECTIONS OF AN INFIDEL

What shall I be—Where shall I go?  
 I'd give a thousand worlds to know.  
 Shall I exist, or shall I not!  
 Ceasing to be—I dread the thought—  
 Does death, in fact, destroy the whole,  
 And with the body kill the soul?  
*Reason*, I choose thee for my guide,  
 I heard thy voice and none beside,  
 Come now decide the doubtful strife  
 'Twixt endless sleep and endless life.  
 Some, who thy sole dominion own  
 As nature's brightest, eldest son,  
 Say thou hast taught the soul will live,  
 And her account to God must give.  
 Others deny that this will be,  
 And both for proof appeal to thee.  
 I feel, I know, that I have sin.  
 And conscience rages here within.  
 If there's a God—(I fear 'tis true)  
 Does he the creature's conduct view?  
 And if the soul immortal prove,  
 Can sinners ever taste his love?  
 Will they have nothing more to fear,  
 Because he governs there and here?  
 If he is good will he destroy,  
 And kill with evils human joy?  
 Are parents hurried to the tomb,  
 Merely to give successors room?  
 If he regards our actions here,  
 Why not revenge the oppressed tear,  
 And crush the cruel and unjust,  
 With pride and malice in the dust?—  
 These thoughts an anxious doubt create,  
 That this is not our final state,  
 If there's a God, then who can tell,  
 There may be heaven, there may be hell.  
 The Bible doctrine *may* be right,  
 If so, I sink to endless night.  
 I *hate* that God which they declare,

His holiness is too severe.  
 I *hate* his law, which says I must  
 Be holy like him, or be curs'd.  
 Once I could laugh at what I feel,  
 And scorn the thought of heaven and hell,  
 But reason shines as clear as day,  
 Although my outward man decay;  
 Yea it may shine and never stop,  
 And misery fill my future cup—  
 Draw near, my friends, if friends indeed,  
 You will assist me now in need.  
 With you I spent the jovial day,  
 And cast the thought of death away,  
 I spurn'd at God, at Christ and hell,  
 As names that priests and women tell.  
 I gave the reins to sin and lust,  
 Which hastened my return to dust.  
 O can you screen my soul from harm  
 Against the power of any arm!  
 Ah, wretches, stop—deceive no more  
 I've heard all you can say before—  
 I scorn'd the christian and his God,  
 And trampled on his Savior's blood,  
 With him I now no part can claim,  
 For still I hate the very name.  
 Yet he must be more safe than I,  
 And more prepared to live or die.—  
 If I was right, still *he* is well;  
 But if he's right—I sink to hell.

“Prayer For The Dying Unbeliever”

*Mechanics' Free Press*, 24 January 1829

#### PRAYER FOR THE DYING UNBELIEVER

How solemn to witness the last ebbing breath—  
 How mournful the sound of that falt'ring groan,  
 When the infidel leans on the bosom of death  
 E're he leaps out of time to eternity's bourne!—  
 O stay thee, my God, let thy justice forbear,  
 While mercy thy daughter stoops down from the skys,  
 While hope beams a ray ere the shades of despair  
 On the wings of salvation I bid them arise;

Thou hast promis'd, O Lord, in thy fullness to save

The earnest of him, who hath died to redeem;  
 Here philosophy weeps on the verge of the grave,  
 And pray's [sic] for the hope she has bartered for fame;  
 O frown not in wrath, Lord remember thy fold,  
 Where once he reposed 'neath thy fostering care,\*  
 He sought not the chains that now fetter his soul,  
 He paus'd but to reason, and sunk to despair!

From the smile of thy love like the angels he leaps—  
 Aspiring to grasp what thy wisdom has seal'd;  
 And now on the verge of destruction he weeps,  
 O save, ere his soul to the billows shall yield;  
 Let the dew drop of pity, descend [sic] from thy throne,  
 Let the mandate of mercy unfetter his snare,  
 His triumphs shall swell with a loftier tone  
 As redeemed from the deepest abyss of despair.

R. P. RISDON

\*It may not be improper to inform the reader that, these lines were occasioned by the melancholy scene of which they treat.

“Reflections on passing the grave of Thomas Paine”  
*The Methodist Magazine*, 1 March 1820

*For the Methodist Magazine*

REFLECTIONS

*On passing the grave of Thomas Paine*

When struggling nature heaves the parting sigh,  
 And hope and fear maintain a doubtful strife,  
 Why shrinks the firm philosopher to die?  
 Why clings the trembling infidel to life?

Oh, 'tis because his hope, forbid to soar  
 Beyond the grave's impenetrable gloom,  
 Beholds, when life's poor pilgrimage is o'er,  
 A dread annihilation in the tomb!

For who can plunge into a gulph unknown,  
 A land of darkness, solitude, and shade!  
 Leap from the crumbling brink of life alone,  
 Nor feel the terrors that are round him spread?

And did he die without a hope of heaven?  
 Around his couch did no kind angel bend,

To whisper in his heart of sins forgiv'n,  
 And hopes of happiness that never end?

Oh then, indeed, 'twas terrible to die,  
 'Twas dreadful to resign the ling'ring breath;  
 A keener anguish bars the parting sigh,  
 And horror hovers o'er the couch of death.

Dark, wretched, gloomy was his mortal life,  
 A prey to passion, and to sense a slave  
 The hapless child of misery and strife,  
 Rests not in peace ev'n in his lonely grave. \*

What deep emotion, in my bosom swells,  
 While I this melancholy spot survey;  
 On scenes long past, recording mem'ry dwells,  
 When I, like him, pursued the devious way.

And do I live?—and am call'd to prove  
 An interest in the grace I once deni'd:  
 Oh, wond'rous pow'r! Oh all victorious love!  
 That led my heart to find the Crucified!

Saviour, let all my future days be thine,  
 To spread thy praise be all my sweet employ!  
 And while I know that thou, my God, art mine,  
 All toil is sweet, and every pain is joy.

C.M.

*New York, November, 1819*

\*Perhaps it is not generally known that the remains of T.P. have been lately removed from his solitary grave, and it is supposed sent to England.

“The Infidel”

*The Cleveland Observer*, 3 May 1838

For the Cleveland Observer,

THE INFIDEL

The midnight lamp was burning  
 Dimnly [sic], where a student pale with  
 Toilesome [sic] watching sat. His pen  
 Was ready dipt, and wavered  
 With impatient motion to

Perform his bidding. He wrote, :  
 While o'er his face, there pass'd a  
 Withering anger: "There is no heaven  
 Nor hell, perchance no God,"—  
 "I know not, nor little care."  
 -----The morning dawn'd upon  
 His musings! He went forth  
 With his accustom'd smiles  
 And met his friends with  
 Cordial hand, as he was  
 Wont. His eye glanc'd brightly;  
 And reason seem'd to hold  
 Without dispute her high,  
 Imperial throne. Day followed  
 Day, with slow and steady pace;  
 A change came o'er the youth,  
 He seldom smil'd, or spoke;  
 Sneer chased sneer, from off his  
 Curling lip: --gloom cloth'd him  
 With her chilly mantle: wild  
 Chaos thron'd himself, where  
 Once bright reason sat—  
 His mind gave way,--and  
 Fell with one wild crash.  
 He mocking traml'd virtue down  
 With ruthless step;--and stalk'd  
 O'er blighted hearts and smil'd.  
 He hated all mankind; and with  
 Them curs'd himself; light seem'd  
 Darkness to his eyes; the green  
 Fields, and singing birds, he lived  
 Not, the words of friendship,  
 Were molten lava to his soul  
 -----He, with his own rash hand,  
 Had torn, the rudder from his  
 Mind, and now cast forth,  
 Upon life's stormy sea, he soon  
 Is left a cheerless wreck; helmless  
 He drives: no guiding star to cheer  
 Him on: no port to draw his feelings  
 Forth. All, all, is one wide,  
 Cheerless waste;--he gnaw'd his  
 Tongue; and in the prime of manhood,  
 Reeling, plung'd into a drunkard's  
 Grave, and with hot curses on  
 His lips, rush'd to the judgment bar.



S.B.A.

*Euclid, March, 1838*

“The Infidel,” Moses H. Perkins  
*Western Recorder*, 19 December 1826

“Kindled only at the skies.”

THE INFIDEL  
 By Moses H. Perkins.

I’ve heard on Afrio’s dreary shore,  
 The serpent’s hiss, the panther’s roar,  
     No footsteps mark’d the sands;  
 No human voice the desert cheer’d,  
 Save now and then were faintly heard  
     The yells of savage bands.

I’ve seen the red volcanic tide,  
 Impetuous sweep the mountain’s side,  
     And wrap the plains in fire;  
 And heard the shepherd’s plaintive moans,  
 Mingling with Etna’s hollow groans,  
     On passing gales expire.

In twilight’s faint and dusky beam,  
 I’ve seen the murderer’s weapon gleam,  
     Bath’d in the victim’s gore;  
 Ghastly and pale with many a wound,  
 The mangled corse, half breathing found,  
     Stretch’d on the blood-stain’d shore.

I’ve heard amid the foaming deep,  
 When tempests howl and whirlwinds sweep,  
     Heart-rending cries “to save,”  
 The shrieks of many a trembling soul,  
 And mark’d the sea’s tremendous roll  
     Which swept them to their grave.

No shepherd’s moans, nor panther’s roar,  
 Nor wreck, nor corse upon the shore,  
     To me much pain has given,  
 As seeing on the couch of death,  
 The infidel resign his breath,  
     *Without a hope of Heaven!*

“Prayer of Nature” and “The Contrast”  
*Observer and Telegraph*, 3 May 1832

Mr. Isham—

Sir: The lines following were written by--- ---- Esq. of this place. The prayer of nature was written in a lady’s Album previous to his conversion; the contrast he wrote in the same Album after the scales fell from his eyes, so that he could recognize the wonderful works of God, in the revelation of his truth.

I think it will not be amiss to remark, that this is a case of conversion which may be claimed as the fruit of a protracted meeting. Surely such a change of sentiment—such a change of feeling, could have been produced by none but *God*. Can we doubt that God approves, when he rewards after this sort?

Yours in the best of bonds,  
 S----- H-----

PRAYER OF NATURE

Eternal Sire!—a child of clay,  
 Poor thing of doubts and hopes and fears,  
 On whom dim reason dawns no ray,  
 To light him through this mist of years,--  
 Who gave unconscious dust to know,  
 That Thou art King, and Lord of all,  
 And placed it in this world below,  
 Where doubts perplex and fears appal [sic],--  
 Would humbly raise this voice to Thee,  
 A trembling suppliant, but to know,  
 What, in *hereafter*, is to be;  
 Since Here, is but a strife of wo [sic].  
 His soul is dark—O for one gleam,  
 From the Eternal fount of Truth,  
 To quell this wild tumultuous dream,  
 Whose blight is on his phrenzied youth.  
 His, is the madd’ning strife of thought,  
 The tempest of the warring mind,  
 With which existence’s cup is fraught,  
 Which all must drink, for all designed.  
 He bears a spirit unsubdued,  
 That frets its utter loneliness,  
 Cast on the world’s wide solitude,  
 Sole sharer of its own distress  
 He knows no chord of human heart,  
 Vibrates to aught that raptures his;--  
 He stands a rock, upon the chart  
 Of life’s untrodden wilderness  
 But this he would not shrink to hear,

Could he but pierce the sullen gloom,  
 That realm perchance, of keen despair,  
     Beyond the dark remorseless tomb.  
 Parent, Thy sceptre sways o'er all,  
     And Thou canst calm this fev'rish brain;  
 O, deign to hear thy suppliant's call,  
     Who soon, shall murmur not again.  
 To Thee, Eternal Father, King,  
     Thy frailest child of dust would run,  
 And breathe, as his last murmuring,  
     "Omniscient Lord, thy will be done"  
         FELIX—an infidel  
 Dec'r. 1830.

#### THE CONTRAST

That "thing of doubts," Almighty Lord,  
     Who breath'd to Thee that rebel prayer,  
 Who dared reject thy Holy Word,  
     And cast its solace on the air,--  
 Who groped so long in Nature's night;  
     That wretch, to truth and wisdom blind,  
 Now sees a ray of holy light  
     Break on his dark and erring mind  
 Though in his breast stern sorrow raved,  
     And rankled as a venom'd dart,  
 Still Thou, he humbly hopes, hast grav'd  
     Thine image on his bleeding heart.  
 Subdued by Grace, he wars no more;  
     But humbly bends the suppliant knee,  
 And owns that all he felt before,  
     Was chast'ning, kindly sent from Thee.  
 Majestic King! Redeemer mild!  
     Thy goodness fails not here below;  
 And, e'en to that dark rebel child,  
     Thy soothing words of mercy flow  
 Alas! how more than doubly blind  
     To feel a lonely pilgrim here,  
 When thou hast said—"Who seeks shall find"  
     His God, his Glorious Savior, near  
 Then O! let all who feel oppressed  
     With speechless agony of thought,  
 Who see no light, who know no rest—  
     Poor souls, with guilt and error fraught,--  
 Look up to Thee, Redeemer, Friend!  
     Kind Guardian of our erring youth—

And lowly at thy footstool bend,  
 And thank Thee for Thy word of Truth;  
 For *there*, is light, and life revealed,  
 Unfathom'd sea of mercy given!  
 The terrors of Thy Law repealed,  
 The promise sure of bliss in Heaven  
 FELIX—the infidel reclaimed  
 Dec'r 1831

*Boston Investigator*, 3 January 1834

The following dogeril [sic] lines of poetry (if poetry it can be called; it is rather prose run mad, rhyme without reason) was intended as an answer to Paine's Age of Reason, and has been sent us for publication. It may be amusing to some, and as such we insert it. We must let people fight with such weapons as they have; and when they have nothing better than their own foolish assertions, it would be hard indeed to deprive them of those. Let them rail on, then, it is found that their railing has become perfectly harmless. --EDITOR

There is an ill in Far[illegible]ville,  
 A shocking one we find;  
 And to relate this proximate,  
 Has laid upon my mind.

Then first to show how matters go,  
 Respecting this demur;  
 I would advance this circumstance,  
 Just as it did occur.

Not long ago, perhaps you know,  
 A Universalist  
 Came all so fast to gain the class,  
 Of the poor Methodist.

And now in fact, to be exact,  
 Though hard for me to tell  
 This man, alas! has left the class,  
 And turned an Infidel.

And this is worst, because at first,  
 He seemed to walk in light;  
 With Satan's [?] powers, he'd no dark hours,  
 But happy day and night.

'Twas then we felt our hearts to melt,  
 And sang in joyful strain,  
 Till all at once, this silly dunce,  
 Did meet with old Tom Paine.

The fact is clear, Tom Paine is here,  
 And those who follow him;  
 And scripture truths they do confuse,  
 By calling them a whim.

They have a book in which they look  
 For truth to recommend;  
 But truth replies, it's full of lies,  
 I think, from end to end.

Mark well Tom Paine does much complain,  
 Of Scripture lies and crime [?];  
 And I've no doubt but he's about  
 The same thing to this time.

And if you know it, he says the poets  
 Are prophets in his view;  
 So from this source, I learn of course  
 I am a prophet too.

And I foretell there is a hell,  
 And for aught I know,  
 Tom Paine's there with old Voltaire,  
 In those dark realms of wo. [sic]

What if they may lead some astray  
 From all our joys of love;  
 And fling and flout yet they'll find out  
 We have a God above.

A god within that saves from sin  
 And fills our soul with bliss;  
 Think old Tom Paine with all his [illegible]  
 Can beat us out of this?

No! when we feel this holy zeal,  
 In joys our souls ascribe,  
 In God complete we then shall meet  
 Tom Paine with all his tribe.

This awful wretch can never fetch  
 His sentiments to bear;  
 For he's so near like Satan here,  
 I am sure he must be there.

When all men must come from the dust  
 In mercy or in wrath;  
 'Tis them I guess, they will confess  
 That they have miss'd their path.

Now watch them clost, you'll hear them boast  
 They've made the bible void;  
 But all Tom's men can't tell me when  
 It has ever been destroyed.

No, nor begin to tell wherein  
 One word will ever fail;  
 Though fiends or foes may all oppose,  
 It has and will prevail.

With all their fuss, if God's with us,  
 We fear them not although  
 They turn and twist a Methodist  
 Into a common foe.

In tears we pray that Jesus may  
 In merry come and own;  
 But here's the rub with Belzebub, [sic]  
 As I have fully shown.

Now by a mode they've got a code  
 And call it reason's age;  
 But reason cries its full of lies,  
 I find in every page.

I wondered why this was their cry,  
 And sought to know; because  
 The good old book they have forsook,  
 And all its holy laws.

Well if they do in this pursue,  
 One thing they may depend;  
 This heavenly host will stand their post,  
 And face them to the end.

May all who read these lines indeed,  
 A timely warning take,  
 Lest after all they're left to fall  
 Into the burning lake.

But ah! say some, this cannot come;

This never can be true;  
 We'll say it o'er and then what's more,  
 Ain't we as safe as you?

For if your creed is true indeed,  
 Of course we cannot fall;  
 But if it ain't then with the saint,  
 You stand no chance at all.

There's three or four, I hope no more  
 At least of such a cast;  
 My soul for theirs, if these affairs  
 Don't find them out at last.

When death appears with all its fears  
 And they've no Christ to save;  
 This plainly shows the end of those,  
 When sinking to the grave.

O may we shun the evil one,  
 And to the Lord draw near;  
 So that at last when time is past,  
 We may with Christ appear.

In robes of white the sons of light  
 Will all his glory view;  
 Then happy we shall always be,  
 So friends and foes adieu.

#### A SUBSCRIBER

"The Way to Heaven"  
*Boston Investigator*, 21 February 1834

#### THE WAY TO HEAVEN By an Inquirer After Truth

*'Lo! The poor Indian, whose untutor'd mind  
 Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind;  
 His soul proud science never taught to stray  
 Far as the solar walk, or milky way;  
 Yet simple nature to his hope was given,  
 Behind the cloud-topt hill, an humbler heaven.'*

*'An honest man's the noblest work of God.'*

I sing the road to bliss above  
 The different ways in which we move  
     To gain the heavenly seat;  
 Each stupid sect, in error bound,  
 Think they the only way have found,  
     To paradise complete.

The Catholic, absolved by Pope,  
 Cures unbelievers with a rope,  
     Or else the scorching flame;  
 Does penance at the Virgin's shrine,  
 Feels purified from every crime,  
     And claims a saintly name.

The 'Church of England' pay their tythes,  
 Read long prayers with half clos'd eyes,  
     And bless their king and queen;  
 They'll be nobility in bliss,  
 And look on that sect, and on this,  
     As vulgar, low, and mean.

The Presbyterian sourly scowls,  
 Denouncing all as guilty souls,  
     Who are not saved by fate;  
 WE'R [sic] the *elect*, and you'll be *damn'd*—  
 Hell, like a wallet will be cram'd,  
     With God's own reprobates.

The Baptist's, plunging in the stream,  
 Join Presbyterians in their scheme  
     Against the non-elect;  
 Repent, and be baptized betimes,  
 Nor sprinkle babies black with crimes  
     Of Adam and his mate.

The Methodist, by frenzy driven,  
 Groans dreadful on his way to heaven,  
     Denouncing wrathful ire;  
 'Repent, or God will in a trice,  
 'Shake you o'er hell like squeaking mice  
     'Suspended o'er the fire.'

While at camp meetings in the wood,  
 Their A very [sic] sought to do much good,  
     By lustful *art* in sin;  
 Such acts his brethren do approve,



Or *they* this *murderer* would remove,  
 And make their garments clean.

Since four day meetings come in vogue,  
 These sects have caught up many a rogue  
 To do their Parson's will;  
 But converts made in feverish times,  
 Are like a madman making rhymes—  
 They serve the devil still.

The Quaker, smoothly travels on,  
 Thinks *cash* in *trade* is fairly won,  
 And all the world are knaves!  
 But *he* is *honest* all his life,  
 No money gets by fraud or *strife*,--  
 And by the spirit prays.

The Shaker, dancing to the gate,  
 'Calls mother Ann in bliss to wait,  
 And hear his heav'nly love;  
 'I've left the *flesh* and sin below,--  
 'The devil and his works you know,  
 To dance with *you* above.

The Unitarian, complains,  
 That all are bound in heathen chains,  
 And plural Gods adore;  
 He thinks it easier you see,  
 To make his peace with *one*, than *three*,  
 And settle up his score.

The Universalist, will glide  
 As smooth to heaven as school-boy's ride  
 Down hill, on ice or snow!  
 Huzzah! My boys! we'll all be saved,  
 Fo [sic] *hell* is nothing but the grave,  
 And *there's no future woe*.

This clamor only serves to show,  
 That nought of other worlds we know,  
 And men to priests' are slaves;  
 Whose creeds and terror prove most plain,  
 To be but visions of the brain,  
 Or tricks of crafty knaves.

These priests of *earth* have made a hell,

But where's their heaven? they cannot tell,  
 Yet follow close their trade;  
 And prate of *faith*, and fasts, and prayers,  
 With penance, grace, and *anxious* cares,  
 And *cash* in plenty paid.

Happy the man, with mind serene,  
 Who at his post is always seen,  
 On manly Virtue's side;  
 Who heeds no priest's unearthly lays,  
 But gladly walks in wisdom's ways,  
 With *Reason* for his guide.

The man who can his neighbor bless,  
 Without the *parson's* grim caress,  
 Is *now* an Atheist thought;  
 But let us follow *Reason's* path,  
 Not heeding priestly hate and wrath,  
 'Till safe to heav'n we're bro't.

*Concord, NH, Published for SS B. 1833*

"The Birth of Pain"

*Boston Investigator* 4 September 1835

The following lines were written by a young man in the state of Ohio, who is as yet a minor, and sent us for publication. They display a considerable degree of talents, for a young man, as a writer, as well as poetic genius. The thought at the commencement is bold and startling; such as but few have dared to think, and fewer still dared to express. The thought of an infinite being spending all past eternity, till within less than six thousand years, doing nothing; forsooth, because he had nothing to do, and neither tools nor materials to work with, gives an impetus to the mind which finds no resting place until the very notion of such a being is completely exploded. Had the boldness of the thought and language been kept up through the article, and the perpetuity of pain, as well as the origin, according to the bible doctrine, had been equally portrayed, we should have liked it still better. The best way to make people sick of a false god, is to do as Moses is said to have done with Aaron's calf; pulverize it, grind it to powder, strew it upon the ocean of truth, and make people drink of the water until the [sic] are completely surfeited. But, even this, as far as it goes, is not a bad potion to begin with.

#### THE BIRTH OF PAIN

Six thousand years have scarcely yet elapsed  
 Since from his throne of idleness and sloth,  
 Jehovah rose, and stretched his languid limbs  
 To nerve him to creation's mighty task.

Through all eternity's wide years, till now,  
 No orb had wheeled through universal space,  
 Nothing of life had breathed the vital air,  
 The vital air itself was yet unborn;  
 All was profound, unbroken nothingness.  
 God, lived *alone*; and as a short repose  
 Had slept away *eternities of ages*:  
 For the last hundred centuries of his rest,  
 A vague desire of something unpossessed,  
 Had stirred the strings of the almighty mind:  
 A crude idea had scarcely yet given form,  
 Of grades of beings humbler than himself  
 To form his pastime and to give him praise,  
 Had floated loosely in the eternal's thought:  
 He woke; the sleeping fancy lingered still;  
 And *worlds were born* and *suns sprung forth to light*.  
 The bright blue waves of ocean, now were rife  
 With countless myriads of living forms,  
 Various and changing as their watery home,  
 Each wild variety of form and hue  
 That hope has wished, or fancy everdreamed,  
 Of vegetative life; burst forth at once  
 And wrapped the smiling earth,  
 In such a garb as beauty's self might envy.  
 Man, in the newness of his blissful being,  
 Beheld, admired, and praised god in his soul.  
 Even heaven itself, as yet, had been a waste  
 Untenanted by any thing of life;  
 Unvarying silence there had built her throne,  
 Companion of omnipotence in power.  
 But now the golden, ever radiant street,  
 Teem'd with unnumbered bright and living forms,  
 And loud hosannahs rent the startled air.  
 The living light of heaven was mirror'd back  
 From the pure surface of a thousand brows,  
 And praises sprung, rife from a thousand tongues,  
 Which, but the fleet hour past, were silent all  
 In the vast unborn nothingness of space.  
 The Eternal gazed around upon his work,  
 And in the fullness of his new born joy  
 Pronounced it good: His unimagined brow  
 Flash'd forth a smile which startled even heaven,  
 And angels dropped their harps, and ceased their songs,  
 And bent in wonder mute before the throne.  
 But time rolled on; and ceaseless changeless praise  
 Vexed the high vault of heaven, and wearied echo.

The changeless voice of constant adulation  
 Had grown monotonous; and 'gan to pall  
 E'en the Almighty's ear: Time still roll'd on  
 And still the heavenly choir loaded the air  
 With music's richest breath; tones so unearthly sweet,  
 Men heard the echo as they slept beneath  
 And dreamed they were in heaven: By day  
 They roamed the earth in innocence and joy,  
 Plucking the ripe fruits from the bending boughs,  
 Sporting together in the pearly wave,  
 Or, locked in love's fond clasp, beneath the shade  
 Of some kind oak (wrapped in the ivy's arms,)  
 Reposed their limbs, and gave their souls to joy  
 By night, when ceased the bustling hum of life,  
 The magic music of the upper spheres  
 Stole down the air, and wrapped their souls in balm.  
 Jehovah sat upon the throne of light,  
 And still gazed forth upon the varying scene:  
 The heavenly choir poured forth their brightest lay;  
 A change came o'er his brow: The radiant smile  
 Has faded now, as fades the meteor's flash:  
 One only cord (for like the delicate harp  
 The mortal and immortal mind hath many strings,)  
 Within the immortal mind had yet been struck:  
 That one had sounded, and poured forth its sweets  
 Till joy itself grew pain; and sweetest sounds  
 Sunk harsh and grating on the o'erburthened sense.  
 The immortal's brow grew dark, while higher yet,  
 And wilder, and more sweet, floated the angel melody.  
 The proudest servant of the living god,  
 Satan, the prince of angels, pride of heaven,  
 Robed in a mantle of aetherial light,  
 Girded with diamonds, sandaled with the sun,  
 Upon the right near to the throne was placed:  
 His lyre was azure, and the strings were gold;  
 Jehovah gazed upon his favorite's form,  
 Noted its beauty, symmetry; and frowned.  
 His heart was bitter, wearied, sated, pall'd,  
 And even like the mortal's longed for change.  
 The angel caught the gaze but not the frown,  
 And waving high his luckless harp in air,  
 Swept the bright cords with such consummate skill,  
 As waken'd strains even in heaven unheard;  
 The angels shouted with excess of bliss,  
 And heaven's own arches trembled at the sound;  
 The weary echoes seemed to catch new life,

And sent it back in softened melody.  
 He turned him to receive the immortal's smile,  
 But horror met him where he looked for joy;  
 That *brow* was blacker than hell's own dark front,  
 Those *eyes* flashed fires which clove the distant spheres,  
 Rent worlds to atoms, and extinguished suns;  
 His voice found way, and universe was hushed,  
 The accursed harp that gave the eternal pain,  
 Ne'er more shall make its damn'd mirth in heaven;  
 The fair and lovely one who stirred its strings  
 Shall be a horror to hell's horrid self,  
 That *hell* I even now prepare for thee:  
 Tortures unheard of shall distort thy limbs,  
 Pangs unimagined rend thy inmost soul  
 Unceasing fires shall bathe thy deathless front,  
 And molten lava float thy hissing brain.  
 Thy beauteous brow shall wear a fitting crown;  
*Damned maddening scorpions*, shall wreath it round,  
 And plunge their stings into thy bursting eyes;  
 Nor ends my vengeance here; my soul asks more;  
 It shall not be the lightest of thy curse,  
 To feel towards the children of the earth  
 That *bitter, writhing, ranking, causeless hate*,  
 I feel for thee. With ill enduring eye  
 I long have viewed their innocence and joy;  
 They echo back the ceaseless hymns of heaven,  
 And from my wearied ear with constant song:  
 I made them pure, and placed them upon the earth,  
 That earth a garden and a paradise:  
 But my soul tires of this changeless round  
 And like the wind and billow pants for strife;  
 I will have curses to set off my mirth,  
 And groans of agony to point my praise.  
 Go; I will give the power over all the earth,  
 To sting them on to madness and despair;  
 And when, in bursting agony of soul,  
 They turn and curse the author of all life,  
 My curbless arm shall hurl them down to thee,  
 To reap eternal woe and add to thine:  
 For now each heart which thus thou drag'st to death,  
 Shall be a serpent's fang within their own  
 To gnaw forever at its deathless core.  
 A noteless few, from all that people the earth,  
 Shall 'scape thy snares, and gain the realms of bliss,  
 To taunt ye from the battlements of heaven  
 With bitter jibes, to swell your cap of woe.

Aye! When the writhing flame is in your hearts,  
 And mad'ning reptiles pierce ye with their stings,  
 They shall insult your sight with living founts,  
 And balm that e'n your matchless ills might soothe:  
 Then, in the gall of your o'erflowing hearts,  
 Ye'll rise and curse the everliving god;  
 That curse shall fan the flame to milder heat,  
 And add new venom to the scorpion's sting.  
 While o'er the almighty's *kingdom* roll'd his *curse*,  
 Each linament [sic] of Satan's shining form,  
 Had grown more *hideous* than 'twas *bright* before;  
 His sunlike brow was livid as the grave,  
 'Twas girt already with that deathless wreath,  
 Which through eternities unending years  
 Should goad him on to darkness and despair.  
 The golden strings of his accursing harp,  
 Had sprung to life, and left the vacant band;  
 And *crawling, wreathing*, formed that *horrid crown*,  
 And spawned their shine upon his searing eyes.  
 The nauseous worm roll'd on his bursting lips,  
 And suck'd the moisture from his parching tongue,  
 And as it drank the burning, thick'ning blood,  
 Instill'd its poison at the gaping wound.  
 His shrunken and distorted limbs, were black  
 With quenchless fires that burns within his frame:  
 A wreath of flame wound round his heaving chest  
 And sheathed its thousand tongues within his form.  
 The sight scathed e'en the angel's quailing eyes,  
 Used. [sic] fearless and unharmed to gaze on god,  
 Their prostrate forms were cast before the throne,  
 In terror, deeper than may speak in words.  
 All nature's elements of wrath and awe,  
 The wind and cloud, the thunder's crash and flame,  
 Unchained, and curbless, burst upon the scene,  
 And in its centre, shook e'en heaven's self:  
 For the omnipotent creator, now,  
 Had snatched the bolt from out his minion's grasp  
 And with his own mad hand, his own words crushed:--  
 Right, left, and far, the searing lightning sped  
 With rage that ne'er had known his birth till now;  
 And where its rending, crashing, fury fell,  
 Planets were crushed, and systems out of joint,  
 In shattered fragments sped through trembling space,  
 The comet died upon its flashing paths  
 And severed suns sunk in eternal night:  
 Creation's mighty task was half undone

In the brief fury of that guideless storm.  
Go, I have cursed thee, and the withering blight  
Shall sear thy form, and rend thy deathless soul,  
Go, lest my hand annihilate its work,  
And rob my soul of its desired revenge?—  
Madly he leaped the towering bound of heaven;  
That burst of wrath, and power, had nerved his limbs  
With strength of fear, that bliss had never given:  
One yell of agony, and pain, and awe,  
Beyond endurance's utmost power to quell,  
Buis [sic] his dark chest and stunn'd e'en heaven's thunder:  
A pitchy cloud roll'd o'er his sinking form;  
And heaven was silent; for the curse had passed.

The arches quaked; the high dome trembled still;  
As heaves the sea wave when the storm is over:  
The seraph's form still shook; but hueless death  
Might clasp them all, nor make so dread a calm.  
Well might they quake and quaking yet be still;  
The mightiest one, had spent his mightiest wrath;  
Wrath that had lived but once, and never shall wake again.

K.

## CONCLUSION: THE BIRTH OF PAIN

In this study, I have analyzed the role of popular religious experience, and especially religious conversion, in the form and purpose of antebellum American poetry. More specifically, I have argued that the figure of the revivalist preacher underlay the Emersonian conception of the poet and the popular uses of poetry during the American Renaissance. As the demarcation between sacred and secular art was crumbling, religious and irreligious writers attempted to use poetry to convert readers. These attempts at conversive poetry evince an assumed spiritual power of the poetic form, a power traditionally reserved for sacred scripture. However, all explorations point to further questions, so by way of conclusion I wish to pursue a few such lines of inquiry, namely what do these interactions between religion and art tell us about contemporary conceptions of God and traditional orthodox Christian theology?

Included in the poetry collected for the previous chapter is a poem entitled “The Birth of Pain,” a poem that highlights provocative theological issues as it interrogates old questions about the fall of man and the salvation of souls. In the context of antebellum America, these questions are also questions about the identity, and perhaps even the existence, of God. Without God (or with God in a compromised state), the problem of pain becomes a problem for poets, not priests. Art seems poised—here as elsewhere in the dissertation—to supplant scripture as the medium for exploring the nature of God.

This poem appeared in the September 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Abner Kneeland’s *Boston Investigator*, and was apparently written by “a young man in the state of Ohio, who is as yet a minor,” as Kneeland notes (4). In over two hundred lines of blank verse, the poet



retells Satan's Fall from Heaven and the creation of Hell. Predictably, since this appeared in Kneeland's freethought periodical, this is a heterodox version of the narrative, although it does not proceed as far as Kneeland would have liked:

The thought at the commencement is bold and startling; such as but few have dared to think, and fewer still dared to express. The thought of an infinite being spending all past eternity, till within less than six thousand years, doing nothing; [sic] forsooth, because he had nothing to do, and neither tools nor materials to work with, gives an impetus to the mind which finds no resting place until the very notion of such a being is completely exploded. Had the boldness of the thought and language been kept up through the article, and the perpetuity of pain, as well as the origin, according to the bible doctrine, had been equally portrayed, we should have liked it still better. The best way to make people sick of a false god, is to do as Moses is said to have done with Aaron's calf; pulverize it, grind it to powder, strew it upon the ocean of truth, and make people drink of the water until the [sic] are completely surfeited. But, even this, as far as it goes, is not a bad potion to begin with. (4)

Kneeland's editorial frame is useful here, since, on the one hand, he is affirming the subversive nature of K's poem while. However, Kneeland severely downplays the radical, controversial nature of this Miltonic rewriting of the biblical creation story.

K's poem begins at the moment before creation, from which "Six thousand years have scarcely yet elapsed." God's throne is one "of idleness and sloth," until Jehovah "rose, and stretched his languid limbs/ To nerve him to creation's mighty task" (ll.3-4). Like a lazy man of leisure, Jehovah is unmotivated, having "lived *alone*; and as a short repose/ Had slept away *eternities of ages*" (ll.10-11). Already, this is a stark difference from the God of Genesis who waited until the seventh day after creation to rest. K's Jehovah is also a significant divergence from Milton's God, who "from the first/ Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread/ Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss/ And mad'st it pregnant" (*PL* ll.19-22). Rather, God's eventual creation of the world is the product of "A vague desire of something unpossesst" (l.13) that "floated loosely in the

eternal's thought" (l.18) as He slept. Creation was a "crude idea [that] had scarcely yet given form,/ Of grades of beings humbler than himself/ To form his pastime and to give him praise" (ll.15-17). Rather than a carefully designed universe, Jehovah's creation is the vague, undeveloped product of a half-dreaming deity, a "sleeping fancy" (l.19).

The subsequent description of creation undercuts God's agency in the process. While, in Genesis, "God created the heaven and the earth," here, "*worlds were born and suns sprung forth to light*" (l.20). God is less of a creator than a dam holding back the explosive force of life:

The bright blue waves of ocean, now were rife  
 With countless myriads of living forms,  
 Various and changing as their watery home,  
 Each wild variety of form and hue  
 That hope was wished, or fancy everdreamed [sic],  
 Of vegetative life; burst forth at once  
 And wrapped the smiling earth,  
 In such a garb as beauty's self might envy. (ll.21-28)

God's conception of creation may have been half formed, but once life is allowed to begin, it overtakes the world and, eventually, heaven. Before creation, heaven "had been a waste/ Untenanted by any thing of life;/ Unvarying silence there had built her throne" (ll.31-33). This is an unconventional view of heaven, one that judges heaven "a waste" before created life inhabits it. K's placement of God within the first forty lines also undermines the agency and importance of the deity. As a subject, God "rose," "lived *alone*," "Had slept," and "woke." Beyond these unimpressive actions, God is generally passive if he is present at all.

Once "The Eternal gazed around upon his work," he was taken by a "new born joy" and "Pronounced it good" (ll.42-44). His response, "a smile which startled even heaven" (l.46) soon turns to gloom, however, as he grows tired of the "ceaseless

changeless praise” (l.49). Although God’s original plan was to receive the immediate and unceasing praise of his angels, this praise becomes “monotonous; and ‘gan to pall/ E’en the Almighty’s ear” (ll.50-51). Nevertheless, the angels’ music provides a soundtrack for antediluvian humanity:

And still the heavenly choir loaded the air  
 With music’s richest breath; tones so unearthly sweet,  
 Men heard the echo as they slept beneath  
 And dreamed they were in heaven: By day  
 They roamed the earth in innocence and joy,  
 Plucking the ripe fruits from the bending boughs,  
 Sporting together in the pearly wave,  
 Or, locked in love’s fond clasp, beneath the shade  
 Of some kind oak (wrapped in the ivy’s arms,)  
 Reposed their limbs, and gave their souls to joy  
 By night, when ceased the bustling hum of life,  
 The magic music of the upper spheres  
 Stole down the air, and wrapped their souls in balm. (ll.54-66)

The boundary between heaven and the earth is curiously fluid, as the first humans are enjoying the purity of unfallen creation while being comforted by the supernatural “music of the upper spheres.” K’s Edenic world is the perfect marriage of aesthetic enjoyment and religious fulfillment, for not only are the angels’ outpourings serving God’s original purpose of creation, but they are also providing a “balm” for the souls of the first humans.

So far, there is no need for conflict. In familiar narratives of the Fall, Satan rebels against God and begins a power struggle that results in the Satanic angels being cast into Hell. In “The Birth of Pain,” however, there is no such conflict. Instead, the music that so pleases humanity and the angels becomes unbearable for God, and God undergoes a change in response to the beautiful music:

A change came o’er his brow: The radiant smile  
 Has faded now, as fades the meteor’s flash:  
 One only cord (for like the delicate harp  
 The mortal and immortal mind had yet been struck:

That one had sounded, and poured forth its sweets  
 Till joy itself grew pain; and sweetest sounds  
 Sunk harsh and grating on the 'oerburthened sense.  
 The immortal's brow grew dark, while higher yet,  
 And wilder, and more sweet, floated the angel melody. (ll.70-79)

Here, God is the victim of his own, very human, passions. As fickle as “the meteor’s flash,” the smile fades—it is important to note the lack of agency in God’s change. “A change came,” the smile “Has faded,” “joy itself grew pain,” and God’s “brow grew dark.” Satan’s Fall, conventionally described as a willful disobedience of the divine will, here is (on the surface) a matter of terrible timing. Just as God is beginning to undergo this dark change, Satan unleashes his greatest song of praise. Satan, whose “lyre was azure, and the strings were gold” (l.85) “Swept the bright cords with such consummate skill,/ As waken’d strains even in heaven unheard;/ The angels shouted with excess of bliss,/ And heaven’s own arches trembled at the sound” (ll.92-95). Satan misreads God, as he “caught the gaze but not the frown” (l.90) of the deity, and once he finishes his song, he turns “to receive the immortal’s smile,/ But horror met him, where he looked for joy” (ll.98-99). The poet’s subsequent description of this “horror” will prove the most subversive section of the poem.

While Satan expects God to enjoy his otherworldly song, God’s response is far from one of joy. God’s “*brow* was blacker than hell’s own dark front” (l.100). God’s hellish affect turns destructive as “Those *eyes* flashed fires which clove the distant spheres,/ Rent worlds to atoms, and extinguished suns” (ll.101-02). In response to Satan’s beautiful song, God begins to undo part of his own creation. This process is interrupted, however, by God’s impulsive curse of the heavenly artist:

Tortures unheard of shall distort thy limbs,  
 Pangs unimagined rend thy inmost soul

Unceasing fires shall bathe thy deathless front,  
 And molten lava float thy hissing brain.  
 Thy beauteous brow shall wear a fitting crown;  
*Damned maddening scorpions*, shall wreath it round,  
 And plunge their stings into thy bursting eyes. (ll.109-15)

This is reminiscent of the damnation fantasies we saw in the previous chapter, except that God has substituted “*Damned maddening scorpions*” for the fire that had crowned the fallen infidels, although fires still encase Satan’s body, and lava is exchanged for the fluid in which his brain floats. Satan’s physical suffering is, indeed, extensive?

The nauseous worm roll’d on his bursting lips,  
 And suck’d the moisture from his parching tongue,  
 And as it drank the burning, thick’ning blood,  
 Instill’d its poison at the gaping wound.  
 His shrunken and distorted limbs, were black  
 With quenchless fires that burns within his frame:  
 A wreath of flame wound round his heaving chest  
 And sheathed its thousand tongues within his form. (ll.162-69)

These images are both grotesque and disturbing, and the poet further arouses our sympathies for Satan by highlighting the disparity between Satan’s beauty and God’s rage. Nevertheless, God banishes Satan and the “accursed harp that gave the eternal pain,/ Ne’er more shall make its damn’d mirth in heaven;/ The fair and lovely one who stirred its strings/ Shall be a horror to hell’s horrid self” (ll.103-106). Echoing Milton’s God, K.’s God sews enmity between Satan and humanity: “It shall not be the lightest of thy curse,/ To feel towards the children of the earth/ That *bitter, writhing, ranking, causeless hate*,/ I feel for thee” (ll.117-120). After God’s curse, Satan undergoes a metamorphosis in which “Each linament [sic] of Satan’s shining form,/ Had grown more *hideous* than ‘twas *bright* before” (ll.154-55). If Satan’s demise in Milton’s epic was tragic, Satan’s fall is here depicted as unjust and disproportionate—the result of an unjustly incensed deity overwhelmed by “*causeless hate*” and mad with power.

God's wrath is not entirely spent on his curse of Satan, however. Instead, "All nature's elements of wrath and awe,/ The wind and cloud, the thunder's crash and flame,/ Unchained, and curbless, burst upon the scene,/ And in its centre, shook e'en heaven's self" (ll.174-78). In a fit of rage, God

Had snatched the bolt from out his minion's grasp  
And with his own mad hand, his own works crushed:--  
Right, left, and far, the searing lightning sped  
With rage that ne'er had known his birth till now;  
And where its rending, crashing, fury fell,  
Planets were crushed, and systems out of joint,  
In shattered fragments sped through trembling space,  
The comet died upon its flashing paths  
And severed suns sunk in eternal night:  
Creation's mighty task was half undone  
In the brief fury of that guideless storm. (ll.178-89)

Perhaps stunned by God's unprecedented rage, Satan is still in heaven while this storm rips apart half of creation, and his presence causes God to cry out, "Go, I have cursed thee, and the withering blight/ Shall sear thy form, and rend thy deathless soul,/ Go, lest my hand annihilate its work, And rob my soul of its desired revenge" (ll.190-94).

Presented with the ultimatum of immediate departure or the destruction of all of creation, Satan "Madly" leaps "the towering bond of heaven;/ That burst of wrath, and power, had nerved his limbs/ With strength of fear, that bliss had never given" (ll.195-97). Once Satan departs, God's storm settles: "The mightiest one, had spent his mightiest wrath;/ Wrath that had lived but once, and never shall wake again" (ll.207-08). K's retelling of *Paradise Lost* thus ends with a promise that this wrath and destruction will never return.

There are two main features of this poem that are relevant to this study. The first is K's depiction of God throughout the course of the poem. Unlike the wise and powerful king in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, K's God is an irrational tyrant whose impulsive rage

threatens to destroy all of creation. Importantly, he is thoroughly—and self-admittedly—unjust. Beyond the disproportionate reaction to Satan’s song, in which God’s favorite angel is punished for praising too beautifully, God also bases an entire theology on his spite for Satan’s joyful song:

Go; I will give the power over all the earth,  
To sting them [humans] on to madness and despair;  
And when, in bursting agony of soul,  
They turn and curse the author of all life,  
My curbless arm shall hurl them down to thee,  
To reap eternal woe and add to thine. (ll.130-35)

In these lines, God is admitting that the source of humanity’s suffering will be God’s permitting of Satan to “sting them,” and when they blame God for their faults, they will be punished in a manner similar to Satan’s sentence. This logic is a parody of God’s interaction with Satan in the book of Job, in which God allows Satan to test the pious man, who subsequently refuses to curse God (although he does question Him). In “The Birth of Pain,” the doctrine of salvation is also a result of this irrational moment: “A noteless few, from all that people the earth,/ Shall ‘scape thy snares, and gain the realms of bliss,/ To taunt ye from the battlements of heaven/ With bitter jibes, to swell your cap of woe” (ll.139-43). Furthermore, even the salvation (or election) of these few souls appears less inspired by love than by spite.

In this poem, then, two fundamental doctrines of orthodox Christian belief—the Fall of man and the salvation of souls—arise not from God’s omniscient plan for creation, but from the momentary, impulsive rage of a petty tyrant. God himself, in his anthropomorphic descriptions, appears more like Milton’s Satan than Milton’s (or the Puritan’s) God. As Abner Kneeland argues in his editorial frame of this poem, “The thought of an infinite being spending all past eternity, till within less than six thousand

years, doing nothing; [sic] forsooth, because he had nothing to do, and neither tools nor materials to work with, gives an impetus to the mind which finds no resting pace until the very notion of such a being is completely exploded.” Indeed, by parodying the biblical and Miltonic accounts of the Fall, K. depicts this God—petty, irrational, impulsive—as the logical conclusion of orthodox theology. The implicit argument here is that God, as traditionally described, is as appealing and useful as the moody gods of Greek mythology (in this poem, he even literally holds a lightning bolt).

The second feature of this poem that is striking is the role of art in the narrative. Our first exposure to aesthetics is the “loud hosannahs [that] rent the startled air” (l.37) soon after creation. Once they are created, angels immediately begin praising their creator through song. Although God’s post-creation smile stuns the angels to the point of “dropp[ing] their harps, and ceas[ing] their songs” (l.47), they quickly return to praising the deity through “ceaseless changeless praise/ [that] Vexed the high vault of heaven, and wearied echo” (ll.49-50). The angels’ songs transcended the celestial spheres to bring enjoyment to humanity below: “And still the heavenly choir loaded the air/ With music’s richest breath; tones so unearthly sweet,/ Men heard the echo as they slept beneath/ And dreamed they were in heaven” (ll.54-7). At night, the music “Stole down the air, and wrapped their souls in balm” (l.66). The heavenly music had both a soothing effect and an ability to transport the human listeners to another realm of consciousness. When Satan finally gives his own contribution to the music, he introduces unprecedented beauty.

Satan

Swept the bright cords with such consummate skill,  
As waken’d strains even in heaven unheard;  
The angels shouted with excess of bliss,  
And heaven’s own arches trembled at the sound;



The weary echoes seemed to catch new life,  
And sent it back in softened melody. (ll.92-97)

Here, Satan seems to solve the problem of monotonous praise by introducing new music that changes the melody being played—interestingly, in line 94, this affects the poem itself as the second half of the line changes from iambs to dactyls, mirroring the transformative power of the new melody. Clearly, the music of the heavenly choirs—and especially once it is infused with Satan’s virtuoso performance—brings significant pleasure to angels and humanity alike. It is worth noting that K. is participating in a view of music that dates back as far as the Hebrew Scriptures. In the book of 1 Samuel, God is said to have sent an evil spirit to torment Saul after he disobeyed one of God’s commands. David comes to soothe the suffering king, however: “And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him” (16:23). Similarly, the “bustle” that fills the days of humanity in K.’s poem falls away and is replaced by medicinal relief from the angelic music.

But the music had a very different effect on the intended audience. Very quickly, God grows tired of the songs he hears. While the angels’ music was intended to praise (and therefore please) God, the perpetual single tone of praise “Sunk harsh and grating on the o’erburthened sense [of God]./ The immortal’s brow grew dark, while higher yet,/ And wilder, and more sweet, floated the angel melody” (ll.77-79). In this context, Satan’s entrance proves poorly timed, as even the angel’s God-given appearance exacerbates the problem: “Jehovah gazed upon his favorite’s form,/ Noted its beauty, symmetry; and frowned./ His heart was bitter, wearied, sated, pall’d,/ And even like the mortal’s longed for change” (ll.86-89). God is clearly undergoing a change in this

portion of the poem, and music plays an important role in this change. It is the monotonous nature of the music that, while beautiful, nevertheless causes God to grow annoyed, “bitter, wearied, sated, pall’d.” Once Satan alters the melody, one could expect God’s bitterness and weariness to be soothed, but the melody has an opposite effect—namely, the transformation of a slightly embittered deity to a being completely overcome with rage. God candidly admits that his “soul tires of this changeless round/ And like the wind and billow pants for strife;/ I will have curses to set off my mirth,/ And groans of agony to point my praise” (ll.126-29). The variety introduced by Satan is not enough because God still desires to hear the sounds produced by agony. It is for this reason that he recasts Satan as a villain to pester humanity, who now must also suffer Satan’s ability “To sting them on to madness and despair” (l.131). The “Birth of Pain,” a recasting of more traditional narrative surrounding the Fall, springs from God’s arbitrary, primarily aesthetic, desires.

By the end of K.’s poem, Satan has fled heaven, God has spent his rage, “And heaven was silent; for the curse had passed” (l.201). Within the narrative of the poem, the music does not restart. While God apparently intended to include the sounds of suffering into the strains of music he already heard, the result of his vengeance is a quelling of all music. The poet leaves us with a calmed God: “The mightiest one, had spent his mightiest wrath;/ Wrath that had lived but once, and never shall wake again” (ll.207-08). The final line is unsatisfactory, and scans differently from any previous line, opening with a spondee and containing seven feet. This, combined with the unpredictable nature of God’s disposition throughout the poem, gives us little faith that God will not be stirred to vengeance in the future.

This poem is imputing a great deal of power and significance to art. It has the ability to transform a divine being from self-satisfied to one whose “*brow* was blacker than hell’s own dark front” (l.100). Simultaneously, art brings “excess of bliss” to angels and provides a “balm” to humanity. Although “The Birth of Pain” predates Emerson’s “Merlin’s Song,” it is worth noting the power attributed to music in Emerson’s poem:

Of Merlin wise I learned a song,--  
Sing it low or sing it loud,  
It is mightier than the strong,  
And punishes the proud.  
I sing it to the surging crowd,--  
Good men it will calm and cheer,  
Bad men it will chain and cage—  
In the heart of the music peals a strain  
Which only angels hear;  
Whether it waken joy or rage  
Hushed myriads hark in vain,  
Yet they who hear it shed their age,  
And take their youth again. (Emerson 732-33)

As we saw in Chapter One, Emerson’s attributes supernatural power to the song of the bard (and, by extension, Emerson’s ideal for poetry). It has a leveling force, as it “punishes the proud” and it has the ability to rejuvenate listeners. Lines six and seven, however, are the most relevant as we look at K.’s “The Birth of Pain.” For Emerson, music is a double-edged sword: “Good men it will calm and cheer,/ Bad men it will chain and cage.” If we apply this logic to “The Birth of Pain,” humanity, for whom angelic music is a balm, has an inherent goodness, while God’s fierce reaction to the music betrays his inherent evil.

Beyond the healing power of the music, the angelic musicians have the ability to transport human listeners to heavenly realms, so that men “dreamed they were in

heaven.” William James similarly connects art with religious experience in his

“Mysticism” lecture in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

Single words, and conjunctions of words, effects of light on land and sea, odors and musical sounds, all bring it when the mind is turned aright. Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words have now perhaps become mere polished surfaces for us; but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility. (331)

For James, there is an interdependent facet of the aesthetic experience—namely, the artwork’s ability to transport us into an ineffable realm of mystical experience and our own ability “mystical susceptibility.” Inherent in powerful art is a supernatural power akin to religious experience. As Jeremy Carrette writes in *William James’s Hidden Religious Imagination*, “Poetry and religion for James were about achieving a sense of moral support from the reality of the ‘unseen’ to give strength to live actively in the world” (180). The reader of poetry (like the listener of music) experiences art as a mystic experiences religion—she leaves the work of art with an eternal truth obtained from an unseen realm. In “The Birth of Pain,” both the angels and the humans have this susceptibility for mystical experience, and the music clearly contains “the eternal inner message of the arts.” Outside of God himself, “The Birth of Pain” offers an image of the Emersonian and Jamesian ideal aesthetic experience: like religion, art can be a healing, calming force just as it can be a conduit toward new levels of consciousness.

By glorifying the aesthetic and religious experiences of angels and humans in “The Birth of Pain,” the poet highlights the inexplicable and troubling hatred God has for

beautiful art. In Abner Kneeland's editorial comment, he shows that this is certainly how he reads the poem. Applauding the young poet's courage to expose orthodox conceptions of God and the Fall as misguided and untrue, Kneeland writes, "The best way to make people sick of a false god, is to do as Moses is said to have done with Aaron's calf; pulverize it, grind it to powder, strew it upon the ocean of truth, and make people drink of the water until the[y] are completely surfeited. But, even this [poem], as far as it goes, is not a bad potion to begin with" (4). Kneeland's commentary underscores the twofold goal of the poem. First, by depicting the logical conclusion of orthodox Christian beliefs about God, the poet shows the insufficiency of this conception of God to account for ever-evolving aesthetic and religious experience. Like Moses, this poet is a prophet who has seen the truth of God and is consequently empowered to reveal the divine truth (in this case, a deconstruction of a falsehood) to his readers. Second, in deconstructing a false god through poetry, the poet himself offers a "potion" to his readers, who will benefit from the poem as a patient benefits from medicine.

"The Birth of Pain" stands at the intersection of the multiple strains in American poetry we have explored to this point. K. exploits the blurring lines between the secular and sacred by using the form and themes of religious poetry—in this case, Milton's Christian epic—in order to subvert religious orthodoxy. The art depicted in this poem is religious music, which fails to achieve its purported goal (to praise and please God), but instead soothes and transports men and angels. As a result, aesthetic experience supersedes Christian theology, as God is exposed as a sadistic, irrational being. Furthermore, Kneeland's deployment of this poem as a "potion" hints at the therapeutic

role of poetry in the nineteenth century as readers were negotiating their spiritual identities within an evolving religious landscape.

As my chapters have suggested, these negotiations can take a variety of forms. For Emerson, we see it in the form of the revivalist Transcendentalist Poet, a form we see continued throughout Jones Very's poetic oeuvre. We also see this in the popular visual art of the time—moving panoramas—and the ekphrastic treatments of these images by poets such as Very, Elizabeth Fries Ellet, and John Greenleaf Whittier. In antebellum Christian and freethought periodicals, this took the form of combative polemical poetry. However, taken together, these efforts suggest that poems can serve the role of sacred scripture.

But it is impossible for us to leave this discussion here without noting the subsequent decline in the popularity of poetry over the next decades and into (and throughout) the twentieth century. Writing for the *New York Times Review of Books* in 1908, J. H. Sholl responds to an ongoing debate about “The Decline of Poetry,” arguing that, “No, the trouble is not that there is no leisure class, nor that there is a decline in the desire to read aloud, but it is that there are no poets, at least, productive ones” (RB 13). If only poets would “Give us a poem original and musical as ‘The Raven,’ and it will be read in thousands of homes. Give us something with the charm and sweetness of ‘Evangeline,’ and listen whether or not it will be read aloud. Give us the noble, pleasing rhythm of ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’ and it will be heard through the breadth of the land.” While Burns’ “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” and Longfellow’s “Evangeline” both engage religious themes, it is the “charm and sweetness...[and] pleasing rhythm” of these poems that Sholl extols, not their spiritual value. If we take Sholl’s comments as even

remotely representative of contemporary readers, the appeal of poetry lies not as a sacrament, but as a source of pleasure.

I have asserted throughout this dissertation that poets during the American Renaissance were imputing to the poet the powers and the duties of a revivalist preacher. In looking at the poetry of Emerson and Very, we have seen how their work took on the Romantic goal of reimagining traditional religion and, as Abrams argues about Romanticism in general, “undertook to save the overview of human history and destiny...and the cardinal values of their religious heritage, by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being” (*Natural Supernaturalism* 66). In Emerson’s vision, in Whitman’s and Very’s poetry, this reimagining of religion would place the poet at the center of religious practice. The old priesthood would die off and the Poet would take their place. Readers would engage poetry as religious adherents would engage sacred scripture. But broadly speaking, contemporary reviews of poetry do not confirm the conversive goals of these poets. Emerson’s poetry remains overshadowed by his essays, Very was dismissed as a madman, and Whitman’s new American bible, while celebrated, is read in classrooms rather than temples. It would seem that, while the hope of a new sacred poetic text was alive and well during the American Renaissance, it has not survived.

I see two reasons for this. One reason can be found in a fundamental difference between the Romantic project, which celebrates the individual imagination, and the more communal goals of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, which offer guidelines for organizing society and maintaining a cultural identity. The second reason for the failure of Emerson’s poetic ideal to persist is that he asks too much of his readers. For a poetic

text to replace a sacred one, the reader must dwell, meditate, and pray over the lines. This is hard work, and for readers who were used to reading for pleasure, may have felt too much like church (or school). Emerson's poet is trying to fill a niche already occupied by ministers. His poetry is trying to fill a niche already occupied in the popular imagination by the Bible. Therefore, while the American Renaissance was a time in which the demarcation between the secular and the sacred was increasingly blurred, this demarcation nevertheless still existed, at least in the reading practices of the contemporary public.

This is not to say that these poets failed, however. While it is true that their larger ambition of replacing sacred scripture with new, American poetry never came to fruition, it was this ambition that drove these poets and underlay their attempts to convert readers. Their belief in the conversive power of poetry, informed as it was by the religious landscape of antebellum American revivalism, enlivened their verse. The resulting poetry could hardly have been produced at any other moment in American history. It is therefore impossible to understand the poetry of the American Renaissance without grappling with the revivalist impulse behind it.



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