FORM AND FAITH: SECULARIZATION AND
VICTORIAN LITERATURE

By

Joshua Ryan Taft

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
(English)

at the
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2012

Date of final oral examination: 9/26/2011

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:
  Caroline Levine, Professor, English
  Theresa M. Kelley, Professor, English
  Susan D. Bernstein, Professor, English, Gender, and Women’s Studies
  Mario Ortiz-Robles, Associate Professor, English
  Amy King, Associate Professor, English
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ii  
Abstract iv  
1 Introduction: Literature, Religion, and Differentiation 1  
2 Moderate Schism and Comfortable Forms: Trollope Rationalizes the Novel 73  
3 Organic Secularism, Organic Form: George Eliot’s Growing Unbelief 116  
4 Browning and the Evolution of Belief: Holism and the Dramatic Monologue 164  
5 Transforming the Dramatic Monologue: Swinburne and Webster 212  
6 The Forms of Discipline: Christina Rossetti’s Religious Verse 281  
7 Conclusion: Literature in a Secularizing World 326  
Works Cited 336
Acknowledgments

I’ve learned a lot from writing this dissertation, and one of the most important things I’ve learned has nothing to do with literary studies: I’ve learned that I’m surrounded by terrific teachers, advisers, colleagues, friends, and family members. I’ve been fortunate enough to have a wonderful committee helping me through this dissertation. Caroline Levine has been a model director, combining both intellectual rigor and enormous generosity. She brought the virtues of her own scholarly work – wide reading, close analysis, and precise arguments – to her role as committee chair. This project would not have been possible without her enthusiasm and thoughtfulness. Susan Bernstein cheerfully read early drafts and helped them become substantive chapters, reminding me to consider new texts and perspectives. Theresa Kelley brought her shrewd, unerring critical judgment, helping me improve weak claims and inadequate arguments. Mario Ortiz-Robles raised theoretical problems that shaped the major concerns of this dissertation, helping me discover the questions that have occupied my attention ever since. And Amy King joined the committee as an outside reader, bringing an impressive command of historical context that enhanced my own understanding of this project. All five have shown a wonderful combination of scholarly rigor and personal kindness that has made this dissertation a pleasure to write. I couldn’t have written it without their help and advice.

I’ve also been fortunate enough to be surrounded by a wonderful community of faculty and graduate students at Madison. Naming everyone whose presence has helped my work would require me to name most of the Wisconsin English department, but a few people deserve particular attention here. I’ve learned an enormous amount from my discussions with Theresa Nguyen, as we’ve shared work in progress and ideas about our projects. I’ve also benefited from
the department’s Middle Modernity group, particularly conversations with Gabriella Ekman, Daun Jung, Andrew Kay, Jessie Reeder, and Rebecca Soares. David Aitchison and Manuel Herrero Puertas kindly read my chapter on Browning and offered thoughtful suggestions. I’m also grateful to Chelsea Avirett, Brian Knight, and Chris Rogers for their friendship and insights.

My debts are not only scholarly but personal, and here I’d like to thank my family for all their support. I’ve been blessed with a large and wonderful family, but I’d especially like to acknowledge my grandparents, Joe and Jo Glasman and Carl and Nancy Taft, who’ve encouraged me all my life; my in-laws, Joan, Mike, and Steve, who’ve welcomed me into their lives; and my parents, Mark and Stephanie, and my siblings, Allison, Lauren, and Timothy, for the encouragement and love they’ve given me through the years.

And most of all, I’m enormously grateful for Erin Johnson, my wife and best friend, who has believed in me from the beginning and encouraged me all along. Her love, support, and companionship has made everything possible.
Abstract

The Victorian period was a historical moment marked by secularization. While religious belief remained widespread and interest in religion continued to rise, it was becoming clear that the place of faith had dramatically changed. British society was undergoing what sociologists call social differentiation, the aspect of modernity in which various institutions grow increasingly autonomous and dedicated to distinctive, unique purposes. This process, which many sociologists consider the core of secularization, transforms religion’s social place; it diminishes religion’s authority in other social spheres and redirects its attention toward individual belief. Meanwhile, differentiation has similarly radical effects on other social institutions, including literature. Writers are granted the increasing freedom provided by relatively autonomous aesthetics, freeing them to explore the rules and possibilities of their field, but their ability to explore problems from other social spheres threatens to diminish. Victorian writers face a dilemma: how can they investigate the ways in which religion has been transformed, and religion’s place in a secularizing world, without abandoning the newly coherent field of literature?

This dissertation argues that Victorian writers, across a range of genres and religious positions, solve this problem through an intensified interest in literary form. Form emerges as the main site where writers work through aesthetic problems; it also lets poets and novelists embody their attitudes towards religion. What emerges across a variety of writers, from religious believers (Anthony Trollope, Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti) to skeptics (George Eliot, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Augusta Webster) is a commitment to what might be called partial differentiation: a position that accepts a qualified version of secularization and modernization.
While writers embrace the artistic freedom that differentiation promises, they continue to believe that literature, through its formal techniques, can embrace its aesthetic role while addressing religion’s challenges and potential futures.
Introduction: Literature, Religion, and Differentiation

The Victorian period has often been described as the moment where religious belief entered a steady period of decline. According to this standard narrative, a variety of secularizing forces destroy religion’s comfortable place in the world: from scientific discoveries such as the geological age of the earth and the origin of species, to the steadily increasing toleration of minority religious traditions, and the continued influence of the Enlightenment. Unable to withstand the heat from all these arguments, discoveries, and changes, mainstream Christian belief in England began to wither away. This reading of religious history summarizes Victorian Britain with one of the most famous English poems of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach,” and its eloquent description of Arnold’s own loss of faith:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world. (21-28)

On religious faith as in other matters, Arnold has often been made the spokesman for the Victorians tout court. It is no coincidence that two of the best and most influential works of scholarship on nineteenth-century literature and religion are titled The Disappearance of God and Natural Supernaturalism. And major recent studies of Victorian literature’s intersection with
religion often share this “decline of faith” narrative. William McKelvy’s *The English Cult of Literature* argues that Victorian literature assumed a “sacred vocation” (1) as Christianity’s dominant status began to fade. In this account, the nineteenth century appears as a historical moment when “literature was usurping religious power” and “at its best and most powerful performed a religious function or expressed religious ambitions” (McKelvy 16). Across generations of scholarship, from Abrams and Miller to McKelvy, the decline or transformation of faith has typically been taken as an established fact, an inevitable response to the devastating challenge of secularization.

Scholarship on secularization and religion, particularly outside the field of literary studies, has started to modify or abandon the old “decline of faith” narrative. Talal Asad, declaring the assumption that “a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable” (1), examines the “concepts, practices, and sensibilities [that] have come together to form ‘the secular’” (16). Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* argues that the standard “decline of faith” story combines two defensible, valid assertions about increasing secularization – one defining it as the “emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres” (2), another as a change in the “conditions of belief” that makes faith “one human possibility among others” (3) – with a much more controversial claim that secularization necessarily leads to “the falling off of religious belief and practice” (2). Within literary studies, Gauri Viswanathan’s *Outside the Fold* investigates the role that secularization played in Britain’s imperialist project, arguing that “the pressures on literary form to manage conflicting social tendencies, which are often resolved by neutralizing and absorbing religious difference into a uniform social tendency, uncannily reproduce the anxieties of a secular world in dealing with
threatening religious excess” (20). Mark Canuel examines how “the secular” emerges as a “specific institutional achievement” in Romantic-era Britain, instead of being an “individual or psychological phenomenon” (4). He understands secularization as a “shift in the means through which distinct beliefs could be coordinated or organized” (4), not a simple disappearance of religion. And alongside a new understanding of secularization, scholars have begun to recognize how religious concepts linger on in a supposedly secular world. Amy King argues that realist novels, with their propensity for a descriptive model that derives from natural history and theology, “contain the residue of the sacred” (465). Likewise, Colin Jager rejects the idea that secularization can be understood as a simple “loss of belief,” and he investigates how “a religious form – design – is completely intertwined with romantic-era writing” (1). All these scholars make a convincing case that the rise of the secular – and the fate of religion in an increasingly secular age – is much more complex than the “decline of faith” narrative makes it seem.

This study builds on this revised account of the secular, examining how Victorian literature responds to the complex process of secularization. It investigates how literature takes part in the same modernizing process that radically alters religion’s place in the world: social differentiation. Theorists of modernity, from Max Weber to Jürgen Habermas, and sociologists of religion, including Steve Bruce, David Martin, and José Casanova, have all defined secularization as the impact of differentiation on the religious sphere. In this account of secularization, religion partakes in a larger process of differentiation, or the development of increasingly autonomous spheres of “science, morality, and art,” which become “realms of activity” (Habermas, Philosophical Discourse 19) distinct from one another. These developing
social spheres increasingly become “separated off from the spheres of belief, on the one hand, and from those of both legally organized and everyday life, on the other” (19). As society underwent this long and ongoing process of differentiation, the Victorians entered a world where the place of religion became increasingly uncertain, and orthodox Christian belief appeared to be one of many options, alongside dissenting or heterodox forms of Christianity, minority religious faiths, agnosticism, and atheism. Secularization, for the Victorians, was not a simple “loss of faith” story but the product of differentiation itself, leading to increasing doubt about the place of religion in society, and the particular forms religion should take. As Colin Jager puts it, secularization should be “understood not as a loss of belief but rather as an example of the differentiation that characterizes modernity” (1).

But differentiation is not a synonym for secularization; secularization, as many sociologists argue, is the process of differentiation as it affects religion. Differentiation also emerges in other social spheres: science, ethics, law, and art among them. Thus literature does not and cannot simply reflect the process of secularization and differentiation; instead, it too is transformed by that process. Hence this dissertation departs from the scholarship above by examining how differentiation affects two distinct concepts – secularization and aesthetics – in similar ways. The problems that emerge in one variant of differentiation also appear in the other. Along with the gains of modernization – greater autonomy and possibility within particular social spheres – differentiation unsettled these other fields of human activity. Just as Victorian religion underwent an intense debate about its boundaries, its powers, and its ability to shape or intervene in the broader public sphere, literature and the arts faced similar questions about their place in the world. Questions of purpose or function assume a greater importance in the literary
field, as writers rethink what their work should or can accomplish. While modernity grants increased specialization to the arts, with the emergence of modern aesthetics and a growing distinction between literature and other forms of writing, this growing autonomy comes with increasing isolation from other social spheres. Hence writers are faced with a new challenge. The greater independence of art and aesthetics makes it more difficult for writers to decide how—or even if—literature can respond to the crisis of secularization. The very process that grants art a distinct social space also challenges its ability to engage with the problems of the world around it.

The work ahead in this dissertation focuses on how Victorian novelists and poets address this challenge. Although the writers examined here take very different, even antithetical stances toward religious belief, they unite around their shared desire to secure the gains of differentiation (for art, greater autonomy and focus on the aesthetic) while fighting against its disadvantages (social fragmentation and isolation). Consequently, Victorian literature searches for a way to communicate between artistic and social spheres and examine secularization from its own unique standpoint, securing a partially differentiated position even as it reasserts literature’s power to investigate other social spaces. Victorian novelists and poets address the challenge of differentiation through literary form, which allows them to explore religious ideas without abandoning their primary interest in literature. Since form plays an indispensable role in aesthetics, it allows literature to incorporate content from outside the artistic domain without compromising its artistic aims. Hence the formal and generic diversity of Victorian literature can be understood as a set of experiments in reconnecting artistic and religious content; as the process of differentiation fragments the world, literature uses form to link these social spheres.
without collapsing the distinction between them. Victorian literature, as diverse as it is, unites around a shared conviction that this sort of connection is possible and desirable – writers accept the benefits that differentiation brings without surrendering their capacity for examining the world around it. Formal, stylistic, and generic choices emerge as methods for bridging different fields; they enable authors, as they explore what challenges, limits, and possibilities exist within the field of literature, to simultaneously think through the challenges, limits, and possibilities in the increasingly secularized world of Victorian religion. Nineteenth-century literature emerges as what Habermas calls a “switching station” (Theory of Communicative Action 1.250), a tool for connecting social spheres in an increasingly differentiated world. Victorian literature works to accommodate differentiation, establishing connections between social spheres without erasing the distinctions between them.

Through this introduction and the chapters that follow, I pursue two complementary lines of argument that emerge from this theory of literature and secularization. One focuses on the role literature plays in understanding the problems of modernity. For many theorists of secularization, literature has little or no role to play in their arguments. Even those offering a more comprehensive account of modernity, as Habermas does in his theory of communicative action, often treat literature as a mere example of differentiation in action. Instead, I argue that a careful study of literature compels us to refine our understanding of secularization, differentiation, and modernity. Victorian novelists and poets work through the problems surrounding modernity and secularization, exploring questions about the place of religion and art in the world, the difference between private and public belief, and the advantages and drawbacks of autonomy. In fact, we see Victorian literature anticipating much of this sociological work on
religion and secularism. Recent scholarship in secularization theory, defending the
differentiation thesis while arguing that modern religion aims to “participate in the very struggles
to define and set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system
and life-world” (Casanova 6), could be enriched by examining the struggle in Victorian literature
to establish or challenge the boundaries – and overlapping territory – between religious and
artistic spheres. And theorists of modernity from Weber to Habermas, concerned with
differentiation’s potential for “disenchantment and alienation” (Communicative Action II.330),
can learn much from how Victorian literature embraces the greater autonomy modernity provides
and resists these tendencies toward fragmentation and isolation. Nineteenth-century novelists
and poets assessed these complex problems and possibilities long before theorists of
secularization and modernity, and their work helps us reshape and clarify those theories.

The second line of argument I develop inverts the first: just as secularization theory is
enriched by looking at literature’s engagement with the places religion and art have in a modern
world, literary theory and criticism benefits from sociological work on secularization,
differentiation, and modernity. Differentiation theory helps us think through the problems of
aesthetics and form that have remained central to literary studies since its formation as a
discipline. More specifically, differentiation and secularization theories help us understand
problems related to literature’s function (largely understood in literary and art theory under the
category of aesthetics), literature’s autonomy from other social spheres or an economic base
(questions taken up most extensively by Marxist literary theory), and the role of literary form in
these two problems. As it stands, I will argue, literary theory has tended to oscillate between
polarized, implausibly extreme answers to these questions (either banishing aesthetics entirely or
insisting on a pure aesthetics that makes little sense when discussing literature) and sensible, plausible, but under-theorized positions that lie between these poles. Differentiation theory helps us develop an account of literature that offers a judicious explanation of aesthetics, autonomy, and the agency writers have within that social sphere, along with a history of the social processes that make literature the partially differentiated field that it is. Victorian literature actively responds to questions about its purpose and autonomy; it is not a pure expression of a particular aesthetic theory or relationship to the social spheres around it, but an intervention into the debates about function and independence that emerge from secularization. Differentiation theory also helps us understand the role of form and genre, since writers shape their novels and poems according to different ideas about the place of literature and religion – and their relationship to one another. Thus if we examine literature’s response to differentiation, we see connections emerge across two seemingly distinct scholarly disciplines. Put simply: to understand literature, we must study secularization, and to understand secularization, we must study literature.

This dissertation thus makes six major claims:

1) Both secularization and the rising literary interest in aesthetics should be understood in terms of a social process, inseparable from modernity itself: social differentiation, the process in which cultures fragment into a set of relatively autonomous social spheres organized by a distinctive function.

2) Although differentiation theory explains much about literature’s relationship to religion and their place in modernity, it leads to three dangers that often accompany it and need to be avoided: an attenuated concept of agency, a vague concept of
institutional “purpose,” and a tendency toward functionalist errors (such as assuming that cultural products always exist to fulfill a clear, specific role).

3) Nineteenth-century writers who examine religion and literature do not agree on a coherent purpose or abandon other functions; instead, they constantly argue over the functions they should adopt, their relationship to other social spheres, or even whether they have a coherent reason for existing at all.

4) To sidestep the problems mentioned in the second claim above, and to explain the intense disagreement mentioned in the third, we must modify the differentiation thesis in favor of a subtler argument: partial differentiation, in which social spheres recognize their growing independence but fight over what purpose they should adopt and what relationship they should have with the world around them.

5) Partial differentiation helps us understand the role of literary form: it works as a bridge between literature and other social spheres.

6) Finally, Victorian literature helps us understand differentiation: it works to accommodate modernity and its tendencies toward autonomy while maintaining connections with other differentiating spheres.

**Differentiation Theory: A Brief Introduction**

Differentiation is, as Habermas defines it, “the separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres ... science, morality, and art” (8). It is, in his view, the defining process of modernity itself, as society gradually develops into smaller clusters with more coherent underlying roles and increasing autonomy within their own particular sphere of activity. Differentiation, according to Habermas, separates out “each
domain of culture” (8) in order to develop them “according to their inner logic” (9). Niklas Luhmann, in his work on systems theory, has also extensively developed the concept of differentiation, building on and revising the work of Talcott Parsons. For Luhmann, differentiation is defined as the creation of largely autonomous social systems that “constitute themselves through processes of self-selection and boundary-formation” and “cannot be reduced to one another” in either their form or function (77). As Fredric Jameson summarizes Luhmann’s argument in *A Singular Modernity*, differentiation is “the gradual separation of areas of social life from each other, their disentanglement from some seemingly global or mythic (but more often religious) overall dynamic, and their reconstitution as distinct fields with distinct laws and dynamics” (90). For our purposes, we will be concentrating on two differentiated spheres – literature and religion. Both take part in the increasing specialization and growing independence of the spheres and systems that make up society. Hence differentiation calls our attention to the process that makes separate activities relatively autonomous, rather than simply noticing that different spheres of activity are distinct from one another.

Differentiation is a historical process that cannot be separated from modernity, and hence it’s worth pausing to consider two different accounts of modernity and their underlying compatibility. For Habermas, the Enlightenment is the birthplace of a distinctly new attitude toward modernity and the past. He claims that the Enlightenment rearranges social problems in order to examine them “under specific aspects of validity: truth, normative rightness, authenticity, and beauty” (8). Charles Taylor, instead, locates modernity’s birthplace in a long and gradual process he calls the Great Disembedding, a movement with its roots in the Reformation and earlier reform movements within Catholicism. On this account, the developing
“good order of civility, and the good order of piety” (Taylor 105) emphasize concepts of “self-fashioning” (112). According to Taylor, these developments create a “growing sense of our ability to put this kind of order in our lives” (125), laying the ground for a belief system that emphasizes human agency rather than simple submission to divine will. And this Christian humanism, determined to reform subjects into better followers of God, prepares the ground for “an escape from faith, into a purely immanent world” (145). But this account, as Taylor admits, is completely compatible with an emphasis on differentiation as the process of “a separation out and emancipation of secular spheres” (426) and “social fragmentation” (431). Habermas, meanwhile, freely concedes that rationalization and the sorting of social problems occurs because “the unified world conceptions of religion and metaphysics fell apart” (8), gesturing toward the Reformation’s role in differentiation’s birth. Habermas and Taylor focus on two different parts of the historical record, but they tell a similar story, one tying religious reform movements, social fragmentation, modernization, and differentiation together. The exact moment when differentiation begins is not particularly important; what matters for our purposes here is the fact that differentiation is well under way when the Victorian period begins.

And while differentiation theorists disagree about when differentiation begins and whether it should be embraced or resisted, they agree on this basic account of the process: social spheres become increasingly rationalized, or devoted to specialized problems. Indeed, this emphasis on distinctive purpose and activity unites many different and otherwise hostile approaches within differentiation theory. According to Richard Münch, theorists of differentiation often agree that social spheres or fields develop coherent and distinct specializations, even when they fiercely argue about almost everything else. Hence both
Habermas and Luhmann, though they disagree about the ethical implications of social
differentiation, share a common sense of what the process entails. Luhmann understands
differentiation as “the growing autonomy of subsystems of interaction which have their own
rules” (Münch 443), and Habermas also sees differentiation as “a process of growing autonomy
for the spheres of action” as these spheres develop according to their “inner logic” (Münch 445).
In fact, this emphasis on specialization around a distinct purpose has become part of any standard
account of differentiation theory. Jeffrey C. Alexander begins his sketch of the theory with the
statement “institutions gradually become more specialized” (1), and David Martin defines
differentiation briefly as “the process whereby each social sector becomes specialized ... each
social function forms a distinct specialized area” (69). Given this overlap in vocabulary, we can
put forth a basic definition of differentiation: a process in which cultures develop distinct,
increasingly autonomous social spheres containing specialized functions.

Differentiation theory, as defined above, is prone to two major problems that we must
address. The first problem lies in the vague terms “specialization” and “purpose,” and how to
clarify these terms properly. If differentiation theory has anything interesting to say about
history or culture, it will need to specify exactly what the “distinct purpose” of a social sphere or
field is. Neither religion nor literature are social spheres with clear, unproblematic functions
recognized as their single, unique purpose. In fact, many statements in differentiation theory
about the “essential function” of an institution, practice, or sphere of activity need to be
explained further. One danger lies in modifying these placeholder terms about “function” and
“purpose” without becoming excessively vague. Statements like “religion examines humanity’s
place in the universe” or “literature aims to delight and instruct” might well be true, but not in a
particularly detailed way. The former statement will not help you understand how seventeenth-century Puritans in London differ from twentieth-century Pentecostals in Los Angeles, and the latter reveals nothing specific about the differences between Greek drama, Renaissance poetry, and postcolonial fiction. An alternate danger lies in specifying “purpose” or “function” so precisely that the definition excludes much of the category it describes; for instance, “religion examines God and salvation” or “a poem should not mean but be” are both too restrictive. If the concept of differentiation can help us understand literature and secularism better, it will need to clarify the vague claims made here about distinct specializations without becoming too general or too specific. Much of what follows in this introduction aims to find a reasonable balance between the two.

The second problem, perhaps even more serious than the first, is the charge of functionalism that differentiation theory faces. Anthony Giddens has noted that the theory of differentiation “quite often depends upon functionalist notions” (Consequences of Modernity 21) where social spheres become likened to organs in a body, each with a specialized task. And sociologists have increasingly rejected functionalist ways of understanding society. Giddens himself refers to the limitations of functionalism as “decisive and irremediable” (“Functionalism” 96), fatally weakening any theory that attempts to explain social phenomena. His case against functionalism begins by challenging the biological metaphor mentioned above; it leads to the assumption, he argues, that “there are ‘social needs’ which have to be met for society to have a continuing existence,” similar to “biological adaptation” (“Functionalism” 105). For Giddens, it is an enormous error to ascribe “functions” or “social needs” to social systems and not the human beings who populate them. Meanwhile,
functionalist theories forget that “social systems only exist in so far as they are continually
created and recreated in every encounter, as the active accomplishment of
subjects” (“Functionalism” 118). In short, functionalism misapplies a concept from biology and
reduces individual agency. These are very serious criticisms, and it is easy to see that
differentiation theory is vulnerable on these grounds. Its repeated references to “function” and
“purpose,” and the focus on systems rather than individual behavior or activity, seem
dangerously close to the functionalist errors outlined above.

Though we must take these accusations seriously, we should remember the distinct
benefits that differentiation theory gives us. It reminds us of the historical process that creates
distinct social spheres, without reducing these distinctive parts of society into a homogenous
whole. It explains how the problems that recur in scholarship around purpose, function,
specialization, and autonomy are not the sign of confusion in academia, but the legacy of a
historical process that is ongoing and contested to this day. Hence if we take differentiation
theory seriously, we must focus on the historical processes of secularization alongside the
increasingly independent – and distinctive – social spheres that differentiation creates.
Meanwhile, differentiation theory helps us resist the tendency to find a single “prime mover” – a
social sphere that can be considered the driving force behind history and culture alike.
Differentiation does not have a single sphere of activity that reigns supreme over all others; the
concept acknowledges that societies grapple with a number of problems, not a single problem in
many different forms. In Niklas Luhmann’s words, “since all necessary functions have to be
fulfilled and are interdependent, society cannot concede absolute primacy to any one of
them” (236). This subtle approach to history and culture, reminding us of the connections
between social spheres without collapsing them into a single entity, makes differentiation theory a promising approach for understanding literature’s relationship to secularization. The challenge ahead lies in avoiding the pitfalls of functionalism and vagueness without abandoning the conceptual gains of differentiation theory. If we begin to think about how religion and literature can be understood with the differentiation thesis, we can start to meet that challenge.

**Pierre Bourdieu: Differentiation and Agency**

The concept of differentiation thus helps us answer the question of how cultural spheres – literature, religion, and so on – relate to a larger social context. They should be understood as relatively autonomous systems within a differentiated, fragmenting society. But, as critics like Giddens note, the accounts of differentiation above tell us little about the human beings who live in these systems. To understand how human agency works in a differentiated world, we can turn to a sociologist whose work intersects with Giddens and differentiation theorists: Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu makes use of the concept of *fields*, a term he uses in a manner similar to Habermas’s spheres. A field, as Bourdieu defines it, is “a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy” (*The Field of Cultural Production* 162). (The difference between fields and spheres lies at the level of abstraction and, consequently, the number of spheres or fields in a given society: Habermas describes three social spheres containing different forms of rationality, while Bourdieu’s fields are more numerous and tied to more concrete social institutions.) Bourdieu’s account of the literary field – a rich discussion which we will explore in greater detail – shares much in common with Habermas and Luhmann. Nineteenth-century literature, he argues, becomes increasingly differentiated in relation to society as a whole; it moves “towards a greater autonomy” (138). It also undergoes
an internal “process of differentiation,” one marked by the “progressive discovery of the form which is suitable for each art or each genre” (138).

These initial remarks could be found in Habermas or in other scholarship on differentiation. But Bourdieu addresses the problem of agency by giving careful attention to a new problem: how individuals operate within a field. He offers an enormously productive analogy that sheds new light on how fields work: Bourdieu likens writers within the literary field, for instance, to players of a game. (This analogy, of course, should not be used to trivialize fields or their operation.) The value in this analysis is immense: to begin, by moving from the individual as subject to individual as player, Bourdieu gives us a productive account of agency. Just as a player in a game is not free to do whatever he or she likes, the agents within a field are not wholly unencumbered subjects, free to act without any constraints. But neither are they prisoners; Bourdieu rejects the idea that agents within a field are subject to “mechanistic determination” (The Field of Cultural Production 184). Writers, in the case of the literary field, do not work in conditions of absolute freedom, but neither are they puppets of fate, the modes of production, the dialectic, the disciplinary society, or any other such restrictions. Instead, writers are agents who operate within a set of given limitations – a “field of forces” that is also “a field of struggle” (184). Their “perception” of these forces, as well as their “predisposition to take advantage of or reject those possibilities” (184), are the factors that determine what moves they make within that field. Perception and predisposition, I would note, are factors that return our attention to individual agency; although agents in a field are always working in a system constructed by forces that they do not entirely control, they are not simply cogs in the machine. They are able to explore the possibilities within a system. In short, agents within a field are both
constrained and presented with possibilities; Bourdieu argues, provocatively, that “nothing is simultaneously freer and more constrained than the action of the good player” (*In Other Words* 63).

We should notice that Bourdieu’s account of the game and its players differs from other accounts of social systems. Other philosophers, such as John Searle, argue that games are *rule-governed*. More precisely, to use a distinction made by John Searle, games are organized by *regulative* and *constitutive* rules. Regulative rules, according to Searle, are rules that “regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behavior” (33). These are the rules we tend to think of first, and their purpose is essentially to constrain or limit behavior. Constitutive rules, on the other hand, both regulate and “create or define new forms of behavior” (33) – the statement “an English sonnet is fourteen lines long,” for instance, describes one of the constitutive rules of a sonnet, both restricting the length of a sonnet and creating one of the conditions that make the form meaningful. Language itself operates according to constitutive rules – Searle introduces the distinction in order to make his case that “speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior” (22). Bourdieu, on the other hand, emphasizes tacit knowledge of unspoken conventions and habitual behavior. Fields, he points out, do not have a “legislator who has laid down the rules, and established the social contract” (*In Other Words* 64). Nor are rules always (or, in most fields, typically) written down in an explicit code; there is no reliable or infallible guide for how to produce successful literature, make scientific breakthroughs, cook perfect meals, or any number of different activities. Both perspectives can help us understand how agents operate in social spheres, however, if we remember that each one applies to greater or lesser degrees. As a workable compromise, we can use Habermas’s claim
that social spheres are governed by particular forms of rationality, which he defines as “how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge” (1.8). This formulation leaves space open for codified rules and tacit knowledge alike.

The rules, forces, and objectives in both games and fields create a space of possibles (Rules 235). This space of possibles is “an ensemble of probable constraints which are the condition and counterpart of a set of possible uses” (235). As in Bourdieu’s discussion of agency, rules create some possibilities even as they constrain others. Language itself is a good example of constraint and possibility at work, as Anthony Giddens argues:

No one ‘chooses’ his or her native language, although learning to speak it involves definite elements of compliance. Since any language constrains thought (and action) in the sense that it presumes a range of framed, rule-governed properties, the process of language learning sets certain limits to cognition and activity. But by the very same token the learning of a language greatly expands the cognitive and practical capabilities of the individual. (170)

In the chapters that follow, I will explore the space of possibles available within particular genres at given historical moments. The main theoretical claim here is that the restrictions that forces and rules bring are not simply repressive (though certainly many rules and forces act in ways we would justly call repressive). They also create the possibility for meaningful action within a given field. Playing a game does not simply require blind obedience and submission to rules; instead, it requires a “permanent capacity for invention” in order to “adapt to indefinitely varied and never completely identical situations” (In Other Words 63).
Fields and games are not well served by describing them in terms of familiar binaries like “spontaneity and constraint, freedom and necessity, individual and society” (63); instead, fields produce a set of possibilities, a degree of “freedom of invention and improvisation” (63) within the rules that govern them. In the case of literature, Bourdieu names a range of elements within this space of possibles: “problems to resolve, stylistic or thematic possibilities to exploit, contradictions to overcome, even revolutionary ruptures to effect” (Rules 235). These problems and possibilities do not exist outside of the forces and rules that shape the literary field; instead, they are created by those forces.

As Bourdieu notes, the rules governing a game introduce problems and possibilities. And this leads to a third feature of games that will become important for us when describing how writers act in the literary field: games contain strategies and solutions, or sets of choices in response to the problems that their rules create, selected as a plan in the hopes that it will lead to success. Games differ in the number of strategies and solutions they provide; some simpler games with very distinct rules are solved, in the sense that a definitive and irrefutable solution exists for the game. This sort of determinism, of course, does not apply to social systems like literature, science, religion, law, and so on, where the game instead provides a number of possible strategies (and even possible goals). When we look at literary strategies, we might think of Bakhtin’s notion of the speech plan, a set of intentions for an utterance that need to work alongside the requirements and restrictions of a genre. A speech plan is “applied and adapted to a chosen genre” where it is “shaped and developed within a certain generic form” (“Speech Genres” 78). Alternately, we can borrow Jameson’s claim that writers should be understood as “the locus or working out of a certain set of techniques, as the development and exhaustion of a
certain limited set of possibilities inherent in the available raw material itself” (Marxism and Form 315). When we discuss agents and fields, our focus moves from the “raw material” of content to the state of the field – but the emphasis on a set of possibilities remains.

Finally, the term “game” also hints at another characteristic of the literary field – its internal diversity. As demonstrated in Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations, the term “game” covers an enormous number of activities, not all of which share the same characteristics. (In fact, the traits of games outlined above – rules, strategies, and so on – are not applicable to each and every game. I have deliberately examined the traits of games that overlap with Bourdieu’s fields.) This emphasis on diversity instead of a single core characteristic that unifies the term – simple in theory but crucially important in practice – reminds us that the different subsystems within a field are often quite different from one another. If they share enough to be considered a coherent group, it might not be because of any essential characteristic found in each subsystem, but because of a reasonably clear family resemblance. When we look for the common elements of the literary field and the different genres within it, we find “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein §66). As John Searle argues in “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” literature is a prototypical example of a “family-resemblance notion” (59). Just as with games, we can acknowledge the diversity within a field without giving up on the idea of a strong overall coherence that makes the concept viable. In the chapters that follow, our focus will shift from the large and necessarily vague category of “literature” to the smaller, more precisely defined area of specific literary genres.

Bourdieu thus sharpens our understanding of differentiation by giving us a guide to individual behavior and agency. But we need to make one modification to his argument. As
with theories of differentiation, Bourdieu’s account of agency can sometimes be too simplistic when discussing purpose. According to Bourdieu, fields depend upon a motivating factor that he calls the *illusio*. He defines the term as the underlying sense of “belief in the game, interest in the game and its stakes” (227) that makes a field function. Each field, Bourdieu argues, “produces its own specific form of the *illusio*, in the sense of an investment in the game” (227) that gives participants in the field a motivation for engaging with it. It is the “condition for the functioning of a game” (228) a fundamental conviction that the field’s activity is valuable and worthwhile. But Bourdieu has been convincingly criticized for defining the *illusio* narrowly as symbolic capital. (Its close link to the word “illusion” might be telling; there is a tendency in Bourdieu to present this sense of investment as a sort of self-delusion.) As Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow argue, the cynical version of the *illusio* as nothing more than symbolic capital relies on circular definition: “whatever one acquires by one’s social behavior can be tautologically re-encoded in terms of symbolic capital” (91). They make a compelling case for abandoning “the empty claim that the struggle for symbolic capital alone constitutes human beings and the social field” (91). This is not to argue that symbolic capital has no explanatory role, merely that it cannot by itself explain every motivation and value within a field. For example, innovative scientific research has both symbolic capital for the researcher (increased esteem or prestige within her field) and a value as applied or pure knowledge that cannot be reduced to the researcher’s own gain. As Foucault has argued, while a field’s exploration of truth is linked to power or social capital, “one cannot simply say that games of truth are nothing but games of power” (296).
This problematic element aside, Bourdieu’s account of agency and behavior remains enormously productive. It supplants the familiar (and dangerously reductive) opposition between freedom and constraint, reminding us that restrictions and regulations create possibilities even as they close down others. In the chapters that follow, I examine how Victorian novelists and poets play two games at once, combining the forms and techniques at their disposal with the social content surrounding them, and developing a strategy that makes a striking impact in literature and religion alike. All the writers examined here are canny strategists who shape their personal views into texts that cross boundaries between religious and literary fields. Moreover, Bourdieu’s attention to individual behavior fleshes out the useful, but skeletal, concepts of differentiation we have worked with thus far. It brings the “social spheres” of differentiation down to earth, reminding us to ground our analysis in historical details. In the two sections that follow, I will answer Bourdieu’s call for precision by looking at how differentiation helps us understand Victorian religion and literature.

**Differentiation, Religion, Secularism**

Many sociologists of religion argue that secularization cannot be understood without the concept of differentiation. In fact, it is often the one point of shared agreement among sociologists who otherwise fiercely disagree about secularization. Although I will defend this close connection, this definition of secularization is not universally shared. Secularization is a term, as Charles Taylor observes, that has been used in a number of different and often incompatible ways. And in literary studies, the standard account of secularization is not synonymous with differentiation but with a “loss of faith” narrative. In this story of Victorian religion, one that focuses on the rise of doubt and the decline of faith, nineteenth-century Britain
undergoes secularization in the sense of “the falling off of religious belief and practice” (Taylor 2). The story is familiar: from Darwin to new geological discoveries to Feuerbach and Strauss, a number of scientific and theological developments radically challenged the place of Christianity in Britain. And, like Arnold’s Sea of Faith, religious belief withdraws under a fierce assault from these attacks. To be sure, scholars have had good reasons for focusing on these developments – their significance is hard to overstate. And there is no doubt that the rise of Higher Criticism and modern science helped change the sense of possibilities for belief, so that it became increasingly possible to imagine a world wholly outside conventional religious faith or practices. The story of nineteenth-century religion cannot be told without paying due attention to these changes.

As a series of important moments in intellectual history, then, this story has its merits. But it falls flat as a theory of secularization. To begin, historical records simply don’t show this sense of decline. Taylor observes that “figures for adherence to churches rise in England during the nineteenth century” (424), indicating that the period is one of both “destabilization and recomposition” (461), not the collapse of religious belief. If there was a decline in church attendance in England, as some figures show, it was one that “came relatively late – mostly after about 1890” (McLeod 179). And although this eventual decline in religious observance was greater among more educated Britons, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries “the highly educated are more likely to be church-goers than those with little education” (McLeod 181) – a statistic that seems hard to reconcile with the narrative of secularization that focuses on intellectual challenges to theism. In fact, as José Casanova has argued, the persistence of religious belief has long been a problem for theories of secularization that stress the decline of faith. This sense of secularization may well be valuable for explaining contemporary Western
Europe, where religion has indeed undergone a “progressive and apparently still continuing decline” (Casanova 27), but it even runs into trouble explaining the United States (where religious practice remains substantially higher than in Western Europe) or Eastern Europe (where, following the collapse of communism, religious belief has dramatically increased). And it seems even less plausible for explaining the Victorians, given that a larger percentage of British people attended church in 1900 than in 1800. The narrative of secularization as decline of religion, it seems, has encountered a major problem. How can we account for both the seeming health of religious practice and the rise of theological and scientific movements that challenged Christian beliefs like never before?

Two equally unattractive solutions present themselves here. On one hand, theories of secularization can define religion narrowly and, consequently, uphold a narrative of decline. This model, according to Philip S. Gorski and Ates Altinordu, depends on a “rather simple, unidimensional definition of secularization as a decline of individual belief and practice” (57). Even this restricted definition, they observe, requires giving outsized weight to “the campuses of American universities and maybe also ... Western Europe” (Gorski and Altinordu 56), two places where religious belief has substantially decreased. And it has little to say about those locations where private religious faith has not faded. On the other hand, secularization can be defined broadly as the loss of a religious system that structures “the whole of social life” – but this is again vulnerable to criticism, since it defines religion in terms so stringent that “it is not at all clear that real religion has ever existed” (Gorski and Altinordu 58). Instead, secularization theory needs to explain widely accepted but seemingly contradictory facts: although “levels of Christian observance and belief in Western Europe are now much lower than they used to be,”
and “ecclesiastical organizations and elites throughout the West perform fewer social functions than they used to,” the “levels of decline vary considerably by country and region” (Gorski and Altinordu 62). Models of secularization thus often run into problems, being forced to minimize some of these facts in order to explain the others.

As a result, the secularization theory has become controversial among sociologists of religion. The debate revolves around two main positions. One party, heavily influenced by European sociological traditions from Marx to Durkheim and Weber, argues that secularization is a very real phenomenon, one that radically transformed Western religion and continues to weaken its social importance. The rival party, emerging out of rational-choice theory, claims that the secularization thesis badly understates religion’s vitality in the contemporary world. The former camp points to empty European cathedrals and public acceptance of irreligion; the latter counters by noting that large majorities of Americans, and smaller but substantial numbers of Europeans, continue to profess a Christian faith. And both have hyperbolic moments where they stretch these claims into dubious assertions, with overly-eager secularization theorists proclaiming the imminent death of Western religion while their equally immodest adversaries claim that supernatural belief is an immutable part of human society. Even if we disregard these particular overstatements, the controversy remains: is religion thriving or dying? Has secularization permanently transformed religion or is secularization itself an odd, and fading, exception to the historical pattern?

Although my arguments depend upon the secularization thesis being largely correct, its adversaries have made a crucial point that I wish to acknowledge. They have cast considerable doubt on the belief that religion must decline under modernity. Churches are not helpless victims
of secularization – they are capable of responding to it in order to retain their vitality. Among the major works on the sociology of religion that have described religion’s potential to survive under secularization, two are particularly significant here: Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge’s *The Future of Religion* and José Casanova’s *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Stark and Bainbridge acknowledge that secularization exists, but claim that it is countered by two rival processes – revival and religious innovation (Stark and Bainbridge 2) – that together form the “dynamic character of religious economies” (3)\(^1\). Casanova observes how churches across the world fight back against secularization, aiming to “defend their traditional turf” and “participate in the very struggles to define and set” (6) social boundaries. Neither of these works have had the last say in their debates, but they have successfully challenged the claim that secularization necessarily entails the decline of religion. Whatever secularization implies, it should not be taken as a simple assertion that religious belief will simply vanish. This is a particularly healthy reminder for studies, such as this one, that focus on the nineteenth century, a time often vaguely thought of as the birth of genuine secularism. But while the famous landmarks of Darwin, Marx, Feuerbach, Lyell, and others cannot be ignored, the nineteenth century is by no means just a time when faith began to disappear. In fact, by many measures, British Christianity was healthier in 1900 than 1800.

---

\(^1\) It is worth noting that Stark and Bainbridge’s definition of religion obscures some of the major transformations that secularization has caused. They define religion as “a system of very general compensators based on supernatural assumptions” (432), and argue that secularization is simply the process by which certain religious groups weaken those supernatural assumptions, only to be replaced by newer religious beliefs that do not abandon supernatural belief. This definition has its merits, but it overlooks the stark changes in the institutional forms that Western religious groups can take. Stark and Bainbridge’s theory can explain why, for example, Unitarian churches have declined while Pentecostalism has thrived; it does not, however, explain why churches in twenty-first century America or Europe cannot offer – and, in fact, do not even attempt to offer – the range of social functions found in the Catholic Church of fourteenth-century Europe or even the Church of England in the nineteenth century.
But if Victorian Christianity was active, contentious, and influential, why not simply discard the secularization thesis as historically inaccurate? Why not simply focus on individual historical moments and religious groups, not bothering to develop lofty sociological theories that are easily deflated with data? Because the secularization thesis is not, properly understood, a claim that religion declines under modernity; instead, it argues that modernity radically changes religion’s role in society. Bryan Wilson, one of the foremost defenders of secularization as a concept, offers his definition: secularization is “that process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, lose their social significance” (149). And this definition of secularization, Wilson notes, does not imply that religious belief will fade away; “it means no more than that religion ceases to be significant in the working of the social system” (150). Even those who have challenged certain aspects of the theory, such as Casanova, have defended this definition of secularization. According to Casanova, “the core of the theory of secularization, the thesis of the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms, remains valid” (6). In this definition of secularization, modernity has not necessarily dealt religion a fatal blow – but it has transformed it, altering its place in the world and the functions it performs. Before secularization, religion was enmeshed in the state, the law, the economy, science, the arts, and other social spheres. After secularization, religion becomes an increasingly distinct social institution, focused on private, individual belief. This definition of secularization, in which religion increasingly loses many of its older social functions and becomes defined around private belief, can withstand the astute criticisms that Stark/Bainbridge and Casanova have leveled against weaker versions of the theory. According to this version of the thesis, religion can survive and even thrive, as Stark and Bainbridge argue; it might even be
able to reverse this trend of secularization, as Casanova claims.² What remains is a more cautious but more defensible claim, one tied to the process of differentiation.

As José Casanova argues, secularization, if defined more carefully, can remain a viable way to understand the sociology of religion. He argues that the “still defensible core” of secularization theory is “the thesis of the differentiation of the religious and secular spheres” (Casanova 7). This sense of differentiation, in fact, calls our attention to the roots of the very word secular. The term was first used during the Protestant Reformation to describe “the massive expropriation and appropriation, usually by the state, of monasteries, landholdings, and the mort-main wealth of the church” (Casanova 13). This process of differentiation, in which religion evolves into (or is forced into, as the example above shows) a separate sphere, places secularization theory on much more solid ground. Secularization as the formation of differentiated institutions is more closely related to another of Charles Taylor’s definitions of secularity: the “emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres” (2).³ Secularization, then, no longer requires the decline of religion in order to remain a viable concept; by shifting focus to the institutional space of religion, we can see how even highly religious societies might become increasingly secular as a response to “the Protestant Reformation; the formation of modern states; the growth of modern capitalism; and the early modern scientific revolution” (Casanova

---

³ Taylor himself resists this equation of differentiation and secularization as defined here; he notes that “the fact that activity in a given sphere follows its own inherent rationality and doesn’t permit of the older kind of faith-based norming doesn’t mean that it cannot still be very much shaped by faith” (425). As I hope to make clear shortly, this is not an argument against linking secularization and differentiation, but a reminder that differentiation is always partial and never complete. Taylor’s argument in A Secular Age aims to displace the “secularization as differentiation” and “secularization as decline of faith” definitions with a focus on the “conditions of belief” (3) and the possibilities they present; while I agree that this goal is desirable, I don’t think conditions of belief can be separated from the differentiated social world that makes them possible.
In fact, many scholars have reached a consensus that secularization is generally a time when “the church becomes institutionally differentiated in response to the differentiation of society” and “the church becomes partially differentiated from other institutional spheres” (Martin 3).

This consensus on differentiation as the engine driving secularization unites scholars who vehemently disagree about the future of religion. Steve Bruce, one of the major proponents of what we might call the strong secularization thesis, argues bluntly that “modernization creates problems for religion” (2). In his account, after undergoing differentiation, “religion diminishes in social significance, becomes increasingly privatized, and loses personal salience except where it finds work to do other than relating individuals to the supernatural” (30). Naturally, he disagrees with Casanova’s claim that religion remains vibrant when it openly resists modernity. But Bruce and Casanova both accept that secularization emerges from differentiation, even if they disagree about whether religion can survive the process or not. Fortunately, we need not take a position on the future of religion to find the secularization thesis useful for understanding the Victorians; we can, instead, follow the large consensus on differentiation and its effects while remaining neutral on the question of its future impact. We can borrow and modify Bruce’s admirably clear definition of secularization, which he calls a process that entails

the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy ... a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and ... a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs. (3)
Bracketing the question of religion’s future under modernity, then, we can say that secularization should be understood as the differentiation of the religious sphere and its separation from other differentiating spheres – and the challenges that this process imposes on religious institutions and the private beliefs of individuals alike.

Of course, secularization in the Victorian era, as now, was a work in progress and not a settled accomplishment. David Martin describes British secularization as a pattern of “partial dislodgement of the politico-religious establishment” (5). We see this pattern in the nineteenth century, as Britain embarks on a process of bestowing greater legal freedom on those who were not members of the Church of England. In 1828 the Test and Corporation Acts were repealed, allowing Dissenters to hold public office; the following year, public office was opened to Catholics. In the mid-1850s, Oxford and Cambridge began admitting non-Anglican students; in 1858, the British Army began to officially commission Catholic chaplains; and Jews became eligible for membership in the House of Commons in 1858 (McLeod 53-54). Thus in less than a century, Britain took major steps toward official, legal secularization, although the state retained a “strongly Christian (and, of course, Protestant) character” (McLeod 54) – a reminder of the lasting imprint religion leaves on officially secularized institutions. Although partial, this was a nevertheless a major transformation, one shifting power away from religion and toward the state. This transformation served a political purpose. According to Gauri Viswanathan, secularization became an urgent priority in the age of imperialism, as it emphasized national identity over religious belief. Viswanathan argues that secularization serves an important purpose for the imperial state, as it “polarizes national and religious identity ... privatizes belief and renders it subordinate to the claims of reason, logic, and evidence” (12). She notes that Thomas Macaulay,
famous for his vigorous defense of imperialism in his “Minute on Indian Education,” also
“fought strenuously for the lifting of restrictions against Jews in England” (6). But the British
Empire’s gain was the Church of England’s loss. The British Empire’s need for increasing
nationalism, ironically, stripped away a number of the traditional privileges that had accrued to
its national church.

But differentiation does not simply imply that religion was assigned to a separate social
sphere, as though it were merely a process of restricting the boundaries of an otherwise stable
and coherent faith. It also helps explain the growing number of clashes and disagreements
within Christianity itself. As Casanova’s etymological analysis of the term secular makes clear,
the Protestant Reformation in many ways marks the birth of differentiation. It is, to use Charles
Taylor’s phrasing, a major moment in the “disenchantment of the world” (85), introducing
religious reforms that “are ‘rationalizing’ in Weber’s double sense ... [involving] an increased use
of instrumental reason” and trying “to order society by a coherent set of rules” (86). These
reforms not only introduce instrumental rationality into the world and prepare the ground for
greater secularization, but also generate controversy over their practices and doctrines.
Protestantism, after all, is not known for its internal cohesion. The Religious Census of 1851
indicated that “close to half of the worshipping population of England was not Anglican” (Larsen
2). A sizable minority of England, it seems, worshipped in churches outside the legally dominant
Church of England, and while this minority had long existed, it had been “re-invigorated and
remotivated by the rise of Methodism in particular and the Evangelical Revival in
general” (Parsons 72). These challengers, although united by a shared position as upstart
religions, adopted very different tactics. Some groups sought to deny Anglican dominance but
found the idea of religious establishment appealing, while others, such as evangelical Dissenters, argued that “the government should not establish a religion but rather it should leave every person free to follow his or her own conscience without interference” (Larsen 152). What we see here is not just disadvantaged groups fighting for their own survival and welfare, but in the case of Dissenters a theological argument for religious autonomy that applies outside their own particular subset of Christianity – Timothy Larsen claims that Dissenter religious leaders were “unanimously and publicly in favor of Jewish emancipation” (155). The differentiation of the religious field, even within Christianity itself, had become extremely pronounced.

Most historical accounts of the Church of England in the Victorian period emphasize its internal tension, not its unity. To be sure, it enjoyed a legal status and prestige unavailable to rival forms of Christianity, Judaism, or agnosticism and atheism. But the Church of England was also torn between factions with very different aims; the Victorian period was marked by “intense controversy between the Evangelical and Catholic wings of the Anglican tradition” (Parsons 24). At one end it was barely distinguishable from Catholicism (and indeed the Oxford Movement, ending with the conversion of John Henry Newman to Catholicism, makes this point clear), while at the other it was essentially a faction of dissenters within the Church of England itself. And between High and Low church factions, there was a longstanding Broad Church tradition that held “a commitment to tolerance of a breadth of theological opinions” (Parsons 32). By the end of the century “the Anglican situation was one of doctrinal and theological pluralism” (Parsons 47), a church containing a multitude of stances and opinions under one banner. Despite its legal privilege as the established church, the Victorian Church of England was no unified monolith. It might not be an exaggeration to say that it was closer to a religious
field of its own, a site where the rival factions within the Anglican church battled for dominance and prestige. What we have in the Church of England is an example of a church that became “differentiated internally and externally” (Martin 286).

We can thus understand the state of religion in Victorian Britain as follows: both the thriving non-Anglican faiths and the Church of England itself were becoming increasingly pluralized and legally tolerated. But that pluralism led to new challenges – as in the form of newly emboldened minority faiths and the growing critical voices within the Church of England. And Christianity was also subject to the famous challenges of the Higher Criticism and modern science, all of which led to increasing turmoil, if not decline, within the religious field. Religion in nineteenth-century Britain had undergone what Taylor calls the “nova effect”: an “ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond” (299). The Victorian era was, in other words, a period of vibrant and active religious debate, where Christianity was both “strong and pervasive” but also “forcefully and vehemently attacked from without and given to rancorous disputes between different factions” (Larsen 2).

The rise of secularism and increasing religious pluralism was not simply an inexorable historical trend; instead, it should be understood as an active contest between groups with very different visions of the religious sphere. Secularization, as Hugh McLeod notes, “did not just happen: it was welcomed or actively promoted by some social groups, and resented, or even resisted, by others” (85).

Finally, under secularization and differentiation, religion is not just one social sphere among many. True, modernity causes enormous transformations across society as a whole. But the processes of secularization and differentiation are particularly urgent problems for the
religious field, because religion has quite a bit to lose. As the argument between Bruce and
others shows, sociologists of religion disagree about whether religion can even survive the
differentiation process. For many other fields, differentiation is often seen as a gain; the term
“autonomous,” frequently correlated with modernity, is a revealing clue here. Even if social
spheres dispute what their function should be, differentiation often seems to provide increasing
independence and freedom. And nobody argues that art or science, for instance, were dealt a
death blow by modernization. On the other hand, secularization and modernization are processes
that restrict and shrink religion’s domain. According to Habermas, the critical moment of
differentiation (which he locates at the Enlightenment) is a moment when the “unified world
conceptions of religion and metaphysics fell apart” (8). Hence while art, science, law, and so on
became able to operate with increasing freedom, that new possibility was purchased by shrinking
the expansive domain of religion. Even if secularism does not necessarily lead to the decline or
disappearance of religion, it does decrease religion’s power and scope. David Martin’s definition
of secularism equates it with the conditions under which “religious institutions, like churches and
sects, become less powerful” (12); even Charles Taylor, eager to reject the simple reading of
history where religion simply fades away, argues that understanding secularism means
understanding how the most fundamental beliefs of religion are “no longer axiomatic” (3).
Differentiation may not destroy religion, but it does threaten it.

To an extent, of course, these problems of increasing skepticism and the collapse of
taken-for-granted axioms appear across many differentiating spheres. Certainly, literature
undergoes a similar crisis in which its purposes are thrown into question. This process of
questioning is so urgent because modernity is, in Anthony Giddens’ words, “a double-edged
phenomenon” (Consequences of Modernity 7). Differentiation brings ambiguous benefits; “the effect of specialization,” David Martin argues, “is sometimes regarded as a loss of function and sometimes as a paring down to the ‘true’ functions” (69). In short, any simple account of differentiation, in which religion quietly drops functions appropriated by other spheres and concentrates on a uniquely spiritual purpose, cannot account for the chaos and tumult of the Victorian period. When the Victorians discuss religion, they do not simply assign it one function and abandon the rest; instead, they fiercely argue over what its function should be – or whether it still serves a coherent purpose at all. Indeed, much of the recent work on secularism has pointed out that many religious groups and institutions are not happy with the limited role to which they are assigned. Casanova, in fact, argues that we are now at a historical moment where “religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them” (5). This sense of unease, and often outright hostility, appears in Victorian faith just as it does over a century later. The Sea of Faith, to put it mildly, was not quietly withdrawing. If we wish to use the differentiation thesis to explain secularization, we must also explain the turmoil that secularization brings.

**Literature: Form and Function**

Just as the theory of differentiation forces us to rethink familiar narratives of secularization, it also reshapes our understanding of literature. Since literature undergoes a similar differentiation process to the one we see in secularization, we must confront some fundamental problems that have appeared in literary studies since its institutional inception: questions of the relationship between form and content, and lurking behind them, the problem of
purpose or function. Just as Victorian religion struggles with finding or defining its purpose in a secularizing world, so too does Victorian literature ponder its role as an increasingly differentiated activity. These problems of purpose and form that occupied Victorian writers remain central to literary studies; Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois go so far as to argue that “the major clash in the practice of literary criticism in the past century” is the conflict between “so-called formalist and so-called nonformalist (especially ‘political’) modes of reading” (ix). In both of these two problems, this clash reappears, setting up oppositions between what we might call “internal” and “external” approaches to literature, stressing either form and aesthetics or historical reference and social context. The widely accepted story of literary criticism, of course, goes something like this: literary studies in its modern form was founded on close reading, stressing formalism and ahistoricism, until being displaced by newer modes of reading that emphasize historical context. (Depending on who tells the story, formalism’s recent reappearance becomes either a welcome challenge to historicist orthodoxy or a reactionary throwback to a bygone era.) This narrative establishes formalism and historicism/contextualism as two utterly different opponents locked in mortal combat, unable and unwilling to find any common ground.

The problem with this story, of course, is that it reduces the very real problems of form/content and text/context to cartoonish parodies – ignorant armies clashing, if not by night, then in journals and conferences. While the debate over form and content/context is ongoing and

---

4 It is worth noting that form and aesthetics should not be equated; while aesthetic theories tend to pay careful attention to form, not all theories of literary form are aesthetic theories, and indeed, many recent formalist approaches distance themselves from any sort of “pure” aesthetics.
occasionally polemical, scholars rarely offer these dogmatic positions. Lentricchia and DuBois’s account of the debate is far more persuasive:

formalist critics are always interested in the vast world which lies outside

literature ... the nonformalists who have dominated literary criticism and

time theory over the last decades of the twentieth century do their most

persuasive work by attending closely to the artistic character of the text

before them. The common ground, then, is a commitment to close

attention to literary texture and what is embodied there. (ix)

What literary criticism must do, it seems, is work in between the unproductive extremes of a formalism that excludes all reference to the world around it and a historicism that reduces literary criticism to, in Ellen Rooney’s memorable phrase, “reading as paraphrase” (26). We must avoid an account of these problems that reduces the solutions to a pair of equally unpalatable options. But while I share the common feeling outlined by Lentricchia and DuBois that form and content, text and context alike must remain at the center of our attention, this is not in itself much of an advance over the unworkable oppositions. We have, admittedly, moved beyond an unsatisfying and impossible choice. But while it is certainly an improvement to discard the questions “form or content?” and “text or context?,” we are still left with the same underlying problem. We have simply decided to phrase the problem in a more productive way: “What is the relationship between form and content, text and context?” Rejecting the false choice between the two paired terms is a good start, but if we stop there, we have in effect answered this new question by saying “there is a relationship.” True, certainly, but not particularly helpful.
As we might expect, the most satisfying answers to these questions emphasize how form and content become thoroughly intertwined. Mikhail Bakhtin’s “The Problem of Speech Genres,” for example, offers a powerful heuristic for understanding language and meaning. His vocabulary begins with the utterance, which consists of “thematic content, style, and compositional structure” (60), all of which are chosen in accordance with the “specific conditions and goals” of the “various areas of human activity” (60) in which utterances appear. And a set of similar utterances, linked by their content, style, structure, and purpose, forms a speech genre. Content and “form” – here separated into the finer-grained categories of style and structure – remain distinct enough that they can be discussed as separate entities; the two are not simply collapsed into one. But the utterance itself, the essential unit of meaning, cannot be understood without considering how content, style, and structure work together (or against one another). Many other examples of this interweaving of form and content can be found. Fredric Jameson draws on Louis Hjelmslev’s distinction of “form” and “substance” into four distinct levels – the expression of form, the content of form, the expression of substance, and the content of substance (Political Unconscious 147) – to emphasize that content is always formed and form is never without some substance of its own. The recent revival of formalism, despite the acknowledged differences of its practitioners, also shares two convictions: first, that the study of form is crucial, and second, that we must understand what Susan Wolfson refers to as “the social register of form” (Reading for Form 11). It might even be fair to say that the interdependence of

---

5 The close relationship between form and content, of course, is not unique to Bakhtin – other similarly rich theories of language include Aristotelian rhetoric, speech-act theory along the lines developed by J.L. Austin and John Searle, and pragmatics. Without minimizing the differences between these theories, they all make a similar and crucial move: they resist an artificial division between the forms of language and its content or meaning.
form and content is a truism in literary theory, even if one or the other is often neglected in practice.

But this agreement that form and content are inseparable cannot end critical disagreements, and Bakhtin’s analysis above makes it clear why. An utterance is not just a combination of content and form; it is a statement with a purpose, chosen in order to fulfill the “specific conditions and goals” of the “various areas of human activity” (60). Hence the form/content problem leads us to questions of purpose and function – questions crucial to any account of differentiation – and it is here, naturally, that disagreements become particularly intense. In fact, most of the theoretical arguments surrounding form and content mask a deeper disagreement about purpose – the “what is literature?” question. Marjorie Levinson, reviewing a number of recent works that advocate for greater attention to form in literary studies, shrewdly observes that this “new formalism” differs on whether form is simply a neglected topic of historicist analysis or specifically “aesthetic form” (Levinson 559). And many of the recent projects advocating for a renewed attention toward form have taken up this problem. Susan Wolfson, for instance, aims in her Formal Charges to defend not only the project of studying form but the idea that “texts submit cultural information to the pressure of aesthetic practice” (30) – a promotion of form and aesthetics alike. Rita Felski’s The Uses of Literature argues that a (perhaps the) major task of literary criticism is to “do justice to the social meaning of artworks without slighting their aesthetic power” (9); likewise, Caroline Levine calls for a formalism that dodges the problems of “a universalizing ahistoricism and the seductions of the purely literary or aesthetic” (632). Derek Attridge sees a laudable return in literary studies to the
“question of aesthetic effect (as well as aesthetic affect)” (1). Critical disputes about literary form cannot be separated from equally important arguments over literature’s purpose.

It should be no surprise that theories of form so quickly turn to the role of aesthetics. For if we grant, with Bakhtin, that utterances use form and style alongside content in order to achieve a particular aim, we cannot stop by investigating form or content alone – we must also examine what that aim might be. At this point, aesthetics returns as a highly contested topic, examining to what degree literature should be understood as a self-contained artistic use of language. The problem, in short, returns us to familiar questions of purpose and autonomy: to what extent should literary texts be understood as autonomous artworks? To what extent do literary texts aim for rhetorical, didactic, pedagogical, theological, or political ends? How differentiated are literature and art from other forms of communication? As with the form/content divide, there are two simple and equally unsatisfying answers to this question; one insists on the autonomy of literature, and one flatly denies it. Neither of these positions is appealing. Both seem to overlook quite a bit about the texts they interpret. And both lead to two different but equally undesirable outcomes. A purely autonomous stance toward literature tends to reject or distort writing that does not fit its Procrustean bed, while the extreme anti-autonomy position tends to dissolve literature in a vast ocean of “text.” Not coincidentally, these two mistakes – unjustified exclusion or unhelpful vagueness – are the two dangers differentiation theory must work to avoid when discussing the function of a social sphere.

Although Marxist literary criticism rarely uses the term “differentiation” (Fredric Jameson’s recent work is a prominent exception), it offers the most extensive and impressive critical work on these problems in literary studies. To be sure, some forms of Marxism advance
the most deterministic possible interpretation of literature and culture. This particular stream of thought, eager to deny any autonomy to cultural or ideological activities, can be found in its clearest form in the works of Marx himself. The German Ideology sets out to “revolt against the rule of thoughts” (37) by insisting on a thoroughly materialist understanding of human activity. And true to their rhetoric, Marx and Engels pull no punches in this work. Their stance here is uncompromising: “Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence” (47). The weight of history and class structure crushes any feeble autonomy that an utterance might claim to have. Instead, ideas are reduced to the product of the material base: the “ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships” (64). True, we can see some space opening up for a less dogmatic interpretation. The qualifier “ruling” might make us wonder about the possibility of non-ruling ideas. And one of Marx and Engels’ examples concerns an era where “royal power, aristocracy, and bourgeoisie are contending for mastery” (65), bringing up the possibility of a fragmented and divided “ruling class” (and possibly, therefore, fragmented and divided ruling ideas). However, these are small concessions to an otherwise uncompromising claim: ideas, and cultural products, are simply byproducts of material history.

But Marx and Engels were unwilling to leave it at that. Engels, in a brief statement revealingly titled “Against Vulgar Marxism,” claims that the “materialist conception of history” argues nothing more than that “the ultimately determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life” (39). Hence, he says, the claim that economics and material history are the sole factor that determines culture and ideology is a “meaningless, abstract, absurd
phrase” (39). Any number of other factors – Engels names “juridical forms ... political, legal, philosophical theories, religious views” (39), among others – also play an important role. In fact, these other factors not only influence history and its clashes, they may even “determine their form in particular” (39). The argument, according to Engels, is simply that “amid all the endless host of accidents ... the economic movement is finally bound to assert itself” (39). Whether we regard this statement as a helpful clarification or as furious backpedaling, the importance cannot be overstated: materialist and Marxist accounts of culture can be far less reductive than The German Ideology leads us to believe. If the forces of class structure, economics, and material arrangements remain powerful, they are no longer the exclusive determinants of culture. The crux of the matter can be found in a famous phrase from Marx’s Critique of Political Economy: “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (425). The disputes about autonomy in Marxist criticism can be seen in these two sentences – specifically, in two key verbs. The problem is this: is culture conditioned (shaped and influenced) by material life or is it determined (entirely governed) by it?

The best Marxist criticism of the twentieth century tends to follow the former, more moderate position. The key concept that recurs across a number of Marxist essays is semi-autonomy, a refusal to dissolve literature completely into a byproduct of the material base. In fact, despite the differences between Marxist literary critics and theorists, semi-autonomy is a recurring point of agreement. This tendency arguably begins with Engels himself, who declares in a letter to the novelist Margaret Harkness that “the more the opinions of the author remain
hidden, the better for the work of art” (40). Althusser declares that he does not “rank real art among the ideologies” (Althusser 270). Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey argue that “to see literature as ideologically determined is not -- cannot be -- to ‘reduce’ it to moral ideologies or to political, religious, even aesthetic ideologies which are definable outside literature” (Balibar and Macherey 282). Terry Eagleton refers to the literary text as “a relatively autonomous formation” (324). And Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious insists on the “semi-autonomy” (37) of the different levels of society (culture, politics, law, economics, and so forth), arguing that “every social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of several modes of production all at once” (95). In all these versions of Marxism, the determination of the cultural sphere becomes far more complicated than a crude base/superstructure model, while preserving the explanatory power of Marxism that connects very different layers of society.

Thus Marxist literary criticism, at its best, has consistently asked the right questions for understanding literary texts. Jameson, for instance, understands that literature is not simply a shadow cast by material reality; it is, instead, something with a life of its own. He agrees that literature is indeed “semi-autonomous” (Political Unconscious 228), avoiding any of the simple determinism that can plague sociological theories of literature. And there are many other qualities in his work to which this project is heavily indebted – his description of the writer as “the locus or working out of a certain set of techniques, as the development and exhaustion of a certain limited set of possibilities inherent in the available raw material itself” (Marxism and Form 315), for instance, is rich and productive. The readings I develop in this project could not have been accomplished without building on Jameson’s work. But his theories radically restrict
their sense of literary purpose. As Terry Eagleton has observed, Jameson’s writing has very little
to say about the “explicit content” (133) of literary texts. In fact, he often simply rejects the idea
that content plays much of a role in understanding the text, focusing entirely on the ideology
found in form itself. Hence he argues in The Political Unconscious that the “ostensible or
manifest ‘theme’” of a novel “is no more to be taken at face value than is the dreamer’s
immediate waking sense of what the dream was about” (217), even dismissing the explicit
themes of a novel as nothing but “a disguise” (238). Marxism and Form goes so far as to claim
that “the shooting of the animal in the content” of Hemingway’s Green Hills of Africa “is but the
pretext for the description of the shooting in the form” (411). Ironically, in Jameson’s successful
escape from a vulgar Marxism that reduces literature to ideology or propaganda, he ends up
slighting content. The subject matter of a literary work becomes little more than a wrapper that
can be discarded once the real content has been uncovered.

Consequently, we cannot simply agree that literature is semi-autonomous and leave
matters as they stand. As with the form/content problem, we should be suspicious of the rapid
agreement around the idea of “semi-autonomy.” The prefix “semi-” does a lot of work to
obscure serious disagreement without engaging the problems that create it. Few if any critics
would declare that literature is wholly autonomous, completely free of any influence from its
surrounding culture. And few would take the opposite perspective and claim that literature has
no autonomy at all. Calling literature relatively autonomous is not incorrect, then, but the
statement tells us less than we might think – it is an indicator of work that needs to be done
rather than a solution in itself. We need to understand why literature, and other cultural
phenomena, should be understood as semi-autonomous spheres of human activity. And we need
to understand just how what the “semi” in “semi-autonomy” really means. Differentiation theory, as outlined above, has yet to clarify matters; its language of “increasing” or “relative” autonomy is no real improvement over the Marxist formula of “semi-autonomy.” Both are placeholders for work that needs to be done. They are guideposts that lead us in the right direction but are not, themselves, the destination we seek.

The fact that these disagreements about literature, function, and aesthetics linger on should not serve as an indictment of literary studies. Literature itself raises these same problems. Since differentiation leads social spheres to focus on specific purposes or functions, Victorian literature itself returns to these questions without neatly resolving them. Scholars of literature replicate this process; their own disagreement testifies to unresolved arguments at the heart of literature itself. All the writers examined here theorize, explicitly and implicitly, about the role literature has to play in a secularizing, differentiating world. What remains constant across each body of writing – despite the enormous differences in genre, style, and attitude toward religion and aesthetics alike – is a refusal to wholly embrace or wholly reject differentiation and the idea of an autonomous aesthetic. Let me briefly mention two authors who make this ambivalence clear, despite frequently being cast as defenders of engaged and autonomous art, respectively: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Oscar Wilde. Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* insists that poetry is “most serious work, most necessary work / As any of the economists’” (II.459-60). And Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying” begins with a staunch defense of pure aesthetics, declaring that “lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art” (103) and claiming that “to art’s subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent” (82). But both immediately qualify their positions: Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* refuses to exchange “the beautiful for
barley” (II.473-475), and Wilde admits that “Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art’s rough material” (102). Given that writers continually argue about the purpose and boundaries of literature, we should not be surprised that scholars of literature do so as well. Differentiation theory explains why these questions of purpose become so important in a secularizing world; it must also explain why answers to these questions, from novelists, poets, or scholars, remain so ambivalent.

Partial Differentiation

If we pause and take stock of what we learn from examining religion and literature in greater detail, we notice that differentiation theory provides us new answers while raising new questions. Differentiation theory can replace tired and inadequate accounts about “the decline of faith,” and it helps clarify what is at stake in critical disputes over form and aesthetics. Meanwhile, Bourdieu’s rich account of agency helps remove some of the concerns raised by critics of differentiation theory; it reminds us that individual activity and inclination need not be severed from a broad, systemic look at society. But we are left with a familiar difficulty that we must resolve, particularly when we think about the literary field: the question of purpose. We have not yet answered Giddens’ argument that differentiation theory all too easily falls into functionalism. Nor have we found a single, plausible “function” for the religious or literary fields; instead, we’ve seen heated disagreement within those fields over what their purpose should be. We still need this crucial piece of the puzzle to avoid falling into functionalism or banality.

The hypothesis I offer for this problem will lead us deeper into literary theory before we return to the larger problems of differentiation. When we develop a better sense of literature’s
relationship to the aesthetic, we can see how to modify differentiation theory most effectively. For although differentiation theory has proven its worth in studies of religion and modernity, there remains something unsatisfying about many claims that it makes about art. The statements that Habermas and Bourdieu make about literature seem less subtle, less attuned to the nuances of poetry or fiction, than those of Barrett Browning and Wilde above. (This is characteristic of the Victorian period; all the novelists and poets studied here theorize about their writing in subtle ways.) For instance, Bourdieu’s analysis, despite its power for helping us understand agency within a system, often makes claims about literature that seem questionable. He claims that since modernization leads to increasing autonomy, the literary field undergoes a process of “purification” in which it focuses on an “essential principle” (138). His answer, both suggestive and problematic all at once, focuses on the aesthetic as the guiding essence of literature. Although literature, he ultimately argues, should be understood as a “social institution,” it is an institution that produces a “pure writer” and “pure reader” (302) who privilege autonomous, aesthetic texts. Bourdieu, despite all his interest in the sociology of the literary field, nevertheless defines literature in terms that aren’t far removed from the New Critics: the aesthetic attitude, Bourdieu argues in The Rules of Art, is “characterized by the concentration of attention ... by the suspension of discursive and analytic activities ... by disinterestedness and detachment ... and, finally, by indifference to the existence of the object” (285-6). The process of differentiation and autonomization, he claims, creates a literary field devoted to a pure and autonomous interest in aesthetics. As the word “pure” implies, Bourdieu’s history of the literary field is one where extraneous concerns (“impurities”) are filtered out, leaving the field with a single-minded aesthetic purpose.
This reduction of the literary field to a focus on pure aesthetics is unsatisfactory, for several reasons. Most obviously, as the examples of Barrett Browning and Wilde show, many (or even most) writers do not aim for this strictly limited purpose; Victorian literature is filled with novels and poems written for didactic or rhetorical ends. Of course, Bourdieu is certainly aware that not all literary texts are written with a single focus on aesthetics, and in order to address this problem, he divides the literary field along an axis that measures interest in pure aesthetics. At one end lies serious, autonomous literature (Bourdieu names poetry as the major manifestation of this category) which is both “consecrated as the art par excellence” and “almost totally devoid of a market” (114). At the other extreme lies commercially successful but artistically negligible (“heteronomous”) literature, cheerfully ignoring any potential that the art may have for aesthetic power (Bourdieu’s example here is the nineteenth-century French theater). In Bourdieu’s story of the literary field, the former liberates itself from the latter. Differentiation leads, inevitably, to “the progress of the literary field towards autonomy” (114). This argument, though, confuses the issue. It changes our focus from the presence of an autonomous aesthetic principle, and the intentions of an author, to the commercial success of a literary text. This move only makes sense if we simply assimilate the term “aesthetic” into the category “commercially unsuccessful,” and there are a number of reasons to resist doing so. The polar opposition of commercial and aesthetic literature has a hard time accounting for commercially successful and aesthetically accomplished work, and the Victorian period is full of writers who met both criteria: Dickens, Eliot, Trollope, Thackeray, Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Wilde, and many more. Even the narrative of increasing focus on the aesthetic falls apart under closer scrutiny; high modernist poetry, for instance, came into being alongside the
poetry of World War I, though the two differed greatly in their stance toward autonomous aesthetics. Bourdieu’s story of literature’s gradual march towards autonomy and a pure aesthetic distorts the complexity of literary history.

Bourdieu’s argument could be salvaged as a normative theory of literature, in which literature that adopts any quality other than an aesthetic one – whether didactic, rhetorical, theological, or any other quality – should be judged as less significant. Few critics would take that step, of course, but it seems at least coherent. Yet there are good theoretical arguments that challenge the very idea of the “pure aesthetic.” Perhaps the most devastating can be found in Hans Georg-Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, which offers a forceful argument for reclassifying aesthetics as a subset of hermeneutics more generally. He does not deny that a perspective we call aesthetic exists; he argues, so far much like Bourdieu, that works of art are formed as part of a process of “aesthetic differentiation” that works by “disregarding everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religious or secular function that gave it significance” (74). And he sees nothing inherently wrong with “dwelling on [the work] as something aesthetic” (78). But, he argues, no artwork is ever perceived wholly apart from interpretation and hermeneutical understanding. Perception is never pure but always “an understanding of something as something” (79). It is quite possible to appreciate a work from an aesthetic perspective, Gadamer argues, but it is never possible to do so without a non-aesthetic form of understanding that precedes this perception. Or, as Nelson Goodman puts it, “there is no innocent eye ... Not only how but what it sees is regulated by need and prejudice” (7). This point is particularly clear when it comes to literature; Gadamer makes the simple but powerful observation that “only when we understand a text – that is, are at least in command of its
language – can it be a work of literary art for us” (79). Without interpretation, the text is merely 
ink on paper; there is no way to isolate meaning on the way to a pure aesthetic.

Wayne Booth, in an introduction to Bakhtin’s Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, makes a 
similar point. He addresses a series of critics who regard meaning – that is, non-aesthetic factors 
in a work of art – as “a taint on pure form” (xiv). In response to the idea that art thrives on the 
“purgation of meanings” (xiv), Booth offers a compelling and devastating response: “Everyone 
who has pronounced thus boldly for a purified form has been confronted by the scandalous fact 
that all actual works of art are loaded with ideology” (xiv). And fiction (or, more generally, 
literature with any representational aims or interests) is particularly prone to Booth’s critique. It 
is, he says, “obviously built of impurities” (xv). According to Booth, this is unavoidable: “as 
soon as you name a character and allow even one event, readers will, in truculent naiveté, treat 
them like people in human situations, and all the effort at pure form has gone down the 
drain” (xv). And, of course, language can never be “purified” of meaning. It is hard to imagine, 
then, how literature could ever operate with the purity that this notion of the aesthetic implies. 
The notion of a pure aesthetic, wholly divorced from other considerations (hermeneutic, 
political, rhetorical, etc.), cannot be established as the single and overriding purpose of the 
literary field. Differentiation theory’s problem with function seems to have run into greater 
trouble: not only do producers of literature refuse to approach a pure aesthetic, it is doubtful that 
literature or language could ever achieve the degree of aesthetic autonomy so commonly 
referenced in differentiation theory.

Literature’s discomfort with pure aesthetics might tempt us to drop the aesthetic paradigm 
altogether. But this would be a mistake – neither Gadamer nor philosophers of art have taken
such an extreme step. The solution is much simpler: instead of following Bourdieu down the unproductive path of pure aesthetics, we should remember his claim that fields are always contested over this precise matter of definition and purpose. As Bourdieu puts it in a more useful passage, the literary field “is universally the site of a struggle over the definition of writer” (224). This struggle is not just a clash between agents advocating for different values, but a result of the multiple purposes and aims within each individual project. This problem is concisely summarized by Gérard Genette, who, beginning a study of the “aesthetic relation” and “artistic function” of works of art, notes that “most works of art have a number of other functions as well” (1). In other words, while aesthetics and literariness remain central to our understanding of literature, these functions and purposes are not the exclusive aims of literature. Therefore, we should regard the literary field – and, I will argue, other differentiated spheres as well – as partially differentiated, not something entirely distinct from other social spheres. This allows us to maintain that literature possesses a degree of autonomy and aesthetic interest, but it also reminds us that literary texts do not have the sort of pure autonomy that Bourdieu’s account of differentiation implies.  

Habermas’s description of the aesthetic function of literature makes this clear; he acknowledges that the aesthetic is a place where “language escapes the structural constraints and communicative functions of everyday life” but notes that this happens “to the degree that the poetic, world-disclosing function of language gains primacy” (Philosophical Discourse 204; my emphasis). Autonomy is always a matter of more or less; literary texts may have a specialized purpose, but they cannot simply be reduced to that specialized purpose, and

6 Furthermore, as Noël Carroll points out, most works of art do not aspire to a state of pure autonomy. “Historically,” he notes, “most art has been designed with the intention to serve practical or instrumental purposes, including political or religious purposes” (45).
their activities are not disengaged from the work of other systems. In the case of the literary field, I believe, with Genette, that it makes sense to regard the (now decidedly *impure*) aesthetic function as one of many possible aims and purposes that a text may have. The challenge for literature, and the possibility that comes with it, is not only to achieve a given purpose, but to define that purpose and make a case for it against other texts in the field. To return to our analogy, literature becomes a game with players who often disagree about the goals – and hence the strategies – that structure and motivate their activities.

Understanding literature as a partially differentiated field helps us grapple with the problems of form and purpose that are receiving so much scholarly attention in literary studies. We can see that the concept of the pure aesthetic simply will not do. We thus have two choices: we can either reserve the term “aesthetic” for the sort of pure disinterest that Kant and Bourdieu, among others, explore. In this case, the aesthetic becomes one aspect of a literary text among others, demonstrating that the literary field contains multiple competing functions and is thus partially, not wholly, differentiated. Alternately, we can adopt a definition of aesthetics that does not contain this emphasis on purity. We see this perspective in a number of theories of art: John Dewey’s definition of art as a structured experience in which “means and end coalesce” (205), since the experiencing of the artwork is its own end; Arthur Danto’s claim that art, in addition to representing content, also “expresses something about its content” (148) through its mode of representation; Nelson Goodman’s claim that we should classify objects in terms of “aesthetic and nonaesthetic aspects” rather than aiming for “classification of a totality as aesthetic or nonaesthetic” (255). But this path leads us back to partial differentiation, since doing so entails a rejection of aesthetic theories that “isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of
their own” (Dewey 9). In other words, if we define aesthetics narrowly, art is impurely aesthetic; if we define art as inherently concerned with aesthetics, we must define aesthetics broadly. Whether we define aesthetics in restrictive or loose terms, we are left with the same conclusion: while the literary field is distinct enough to be considered a separate sphere of activity, it is partially differentiated, governed according to a variety of different purposes, and not completely isolated from the world around it. This conclusion compels us to think of the aesthetic dimension as only one part of art or literature.

By thinking of literature as a partially differentiated field, we can now address the problem of vague claims about “specific purposes” within differentiation theory. However we choose to get there – whether by rejecting Kantian aesthetics, adopting Dewey’s pragmatism, or choosing, with Goodman, to look at aesthetic and nonaesthetic aspects of art – we have settled on what Noël Carroll calls a deflationary theory of art, where aesthetic experience is one of “many different kinds of appropriate responses to artworks” (61). In other words, the attempt to define the literary field according to a single essence, as in Bourdieu’s interest in the “pure” aesthetic, gives way to a view of the literary field as constituted by a number of different, overlapping elements. As John Searle argues in “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” “there is no trait or set of traits which all works of literature have in common ... Literature, to use Wittgenstein’s terminology, is a family-resemblance notion” (59). But this lack of a single defining characteristic unique to literature does not mean that we are wrong to regard literature as a field or social sphere. It simply means that no sharp boundary can be found dividing literature and

---

7 It is significant that one of the major rival theories in the philosophy of art to aesthetics is what is often called the “institutional” theory of art, which focuses on the social institutions that govern what can be called art. The lack of a single trait that clearly defines a field does not mean that the field does not exist or that it cannot be discussed as a relatively coherent institution.
nonliterary texts. We can also see that the quest for finding a single essence for the literary field is misguided; instead, literature becomes a field with a number of key characteristics and purposes, not all of which are found in any given text and not all (or perhaps even any) of which are exclusively found in literature or art.

The literary field, as well as the subsystems of society in general, are thus only partially differentiated. Differentiation does not lead to wholly distinct and completely separate fields; instead, it leads to what Richard Münch calls the “interpenetration of the differentiated spheres” (458). By understanding differentiation as a process that creates partly separated but intertwined fields, we avoid two equally unproductive tendencies. We avoid obliterating distinctions simply because they are not absolute. In other words, the lack of a sharp distinction between literature and nonliterary texts should not lead to treating Bleak House and the daily newspaper as simply two texts floating in a homogeneous “discourse.” But we also avoid the equally untenable tendency to insist on aesthetics as the only relevant dimension of art or literature (a move that would radically distort our understanding of almost every Victorian novel, poem, or play). Instead, by treating literature as a “cluster of interrelated practices” (Carroll 66), we can start to understand how those different practices and objectives relate to one another. By focusing on the interpenetration of two different spheres – in this case, religion and literature – our attention to both overlapping tendencies and contrasts or disagreement increases. We also become capable of fleshing out the “purposes” of differentiated spheres without spending fruitless efforts looking to define the single function of any particular field. Partial differentiation strengthens differentiation theory by letting it escape any desire for implausibly precise definitions of a particular field.
This assertion that differentiation is always partial leads us to modify our concept of literature: although literature certainly includes what we call an aesthetic function, its purposes are not limited to aesthetics alone. All the works that this dissertation will examine share an interest in aesthetic experience, calling our attention to the pleasures and power of literary form and style. But they also bring with them a number of different objectives that sit alongside this aesthetic function – ethical, didactic, philosophical, pedagogical, political, and devotional, to name just a few. The “function” of this differentiated field is up for intense debate among writers themselves. And the “material” being used in the literary field is not composed of abstract symbols with no intrinsic content. It is, instead, language that represents the subject matter of life as it is lived outside the literary field (and, of course, life as lived within that field as well). The game of literature, then, is played with pieces that it borrows from other fields. Literature, as John Dewey puts it, “works with loaded dice; its material is charged with meanings they have absorbed through immemorial time” (249). And this brings with it a new problem: the material of literature is not simply inert matter waiting to be transformed into form. For form carries with it connotations, tones, and histories – it is not a neutral medium. Literature, as the Victorians understand it, is an attempt to play two games at once, with pieces that are never entirely under the writer’s control.

The conclusion we have reached about literature – understanding it as a partially differentiated field that aims at multiple functions and disagrees over which to pursue – can be applied with equal justice to the religious sphere. Secularization was not a peaceful process that refines religion into something more palatable to a modern world. Instead, differentiation creates conflict; while it sorts out the problems society faces into relatively autonomous spheres, it also
amplifies the disputes over those problems. The major claim of Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, in fact, is that secularity should be understood as the expansion of the set of possibilities within the religious sphere. Secularism, understood as the condition in which religious belief is “one option among others” (Taylor 3), implies a world where the space of possibles within religion has radically expanded, as in the multiplying and diversifying options we see in nineteenth-century British religion. And with the new pluralism in what Taylor calls the social imaginary, or the set of ways that people “imagine their social existence” and the “deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (171), the space of possibles generates a new set of strategies. Along with the background of expanding religious pluralism comes a newly enlarged “‘repertory’ of collective actions” (173) for living and making sense of the world. When the space of possibles expands, the strategies for acting within it multiply as well. It would be a mistake, though, to simply view the possible options and strategies as nothing more than a list of possible religious beliefs (if, indeed, it were possible to generate an exhaustive list). There is also the famous problem that lingers in any discussion of secularization: many people don’t want to be secular. In Victorian Britain, possible opinions ranged from those who felt that the government’s steps toward secularism were all too tentative to those who viewed liberal reforms with horror. And the differences cannot always be neatly categorized – there were, for instance, Protestants who embraced legal secularization and Protestants who fought it, alongside the increasing internal disputes over what it meant to belong to a particular faith. There was, in short, no consensus on what the proper role of religion should be or where its boundaries were relative to other fields.
By transforming the differentiation thesis into “partial differentiation,” we maintain the theory’s explanatory power while avoiding the dangers that it has encountered so far. There are three major benefits to this modification. First, it explains the cultural phenomena of the nineteenth century better. It does not dismiss the literary texts written with rhetorical or didactic aims, nor the religious groups who refused to accept a diminished though autonomous role, as inconvenient exceptions to a rule. Instead, it takes for granted that differentiation is always incomplete and always contested, never an accomplished fact of modernity. Second, this modified theory helps avoid some of the problems with functionalism. It offers no confident assertions about the “social needs” that an institution supposedly exists to fulfill. In partially differentiated social spheres, there is no single, agreed-upon function; instead, these spheres are filled with debate over the functions they should adopt and the purpose they should serve. As the word “debate” implies, this theory also restores the agency Giddens and others find lacking in functionalist theory. Social spheres are indeed organized around purposes and functions, but the human beings who live in them actively shape what those functions should be. Finally, partial differentiation calls our attention to the question of how different fields or spheres interact with each other. Since literature draws its material from the world around it but shapes it according to its own relatively autonomous ends, it proves an excellent case study for seeing how partially differentiated fields meet. Thus partial differentiation keeps the advantages of the differentiation thesis – its convincing explanations of modernity – while discarding its flaws.

**Form and Mediation: What Differentiation Tells Us About Literature**

Thus differentiation theory tells us something new about literature: a text’s formal strategies can be understood as the bridge between religious and literary spheres. Formal choices
are the means by which art “shows something about the content presented” (Danto 147), a place where literary problems coincide with the problems of the content they examine. Form, then, is the crucial tool that lets literature explore material from other social spheres without compromising its own (albeit partial) autonomous interests. Consequently, writers aim to develop formal solutions that are aesthetically convincing – beautiful, striking, shocking, attractive, among other qualities – while embodying their attitudes toward the social phenomena they describe. These connections make further sense when we consider that religion and literature share a common set of problems in a differentiating world. The literary and religious fields alike face the question of their new place in the social system: what their underlying purpose should be, how they can and cannot interact with the work of another field, whether to embrace the increasing autonomy and limitations that differentiation brings, and how to understand the explosion of possibilities in front of them. The formal and stylistic strategies for solving literary problems are intertwined with the problems and possibilities of the religious field. The task of the chapters that follow is to trace the way these problems and solutions intertwine, without conflating them and losing track of their differences. Or, to quote Dewey, it is to see how the “new materials of experience demanding expression” are treated with new or varied “forms and techniques” (148). Because literature and religion are partially differentiated, the strategies and problems are never simply identical. But because the differentiation is always partial, those strategies and problems cannot simply be segregated. The challenge is discovering how a text engages with two distinct but related fields at once.

In the studies that follow, formal and generic choices emerge as the crucial link between literature and religion. Form and genre take pride of place in this analysis for several reasons.
The first reason is obvious but worth stating anyway: all texts can be productively analyzed by looking at form or genre, even texts that refuse to make use of conventional techniques or organizational patterns. Form is not just an ancillary or accidental property of a text; it leads us back to the problems of purpose, agency, and activity that we raised with Bakhtin and the Marxist literary critics long ago. Even the etymology of the words “fiction” and “poetry” leads us to understand both as activity. “Fiction” derives from the Latin *fingere*, which the Oxford English Dictionary gives as “to fashion or to form”; likewise, poetry has its root in the Greek *poesis* and its connection to creation or production. (Even if fiction is distinguished from nonfiction by its attitude toward the content of what it narrates, its decision not to make serious assertions about the reality of the characters and events it describes, any fictional narrative makes choices about inclusions, exclusions, and so on that make it a made object.) If literature is a field of activity, as Bourdieu understands it, form (in the most expansive use of the term) is the way agents do things in that field. It is, Franco Moretti suggests, “what literature uses in order to master historical reality, and to reshape its materials in the chosen ideological key” (xiii).

But the importance of form to this study goes beyond its relevance for discussing any text. In a world in which differentiation has steadily advanced, the increasing autonomy of literature brings restrictions along with greater freedom. While a differentiated field becomes more fully capable of exploring the possibilities designated to it, it also becomes more hesitant to explore problems and questions that seem to belong elsewhere. Even among the many Victorian writers who resist the autonomy of literature in its purest and most uncompromising form, there is a general consensus that literature is not simply repackaged religious history or theology. But if form is the constitutive element that makes poetry what it is, and an element of design that
permeates any fictional narrative (as opposed to a single fictitious sentence), form becomes a mechanism for making content literary. Form also has social implications of its own that go beyond its aesthetic power; as Bakhtin argues, language is dialogic, always shaped in response to its social context. For Bakhtin, “our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness,’ varying degrees of awareness and detachment” (“Speech Genres” 89). Language, in other words, compels us to use conventional signs that carry with them a history of meanings and uses. And while each utterance makes use of these conventional words in different ways – as objects that we “assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate” (89) – utterances always grapple with the tones, connotations, and histories of utterances, styles, and subjects that came before them. Form and style, then, are not just some of the most important markers of literature, but social entities through and through. As P. M. Medvedev puts it, “there is no formless content and there is no contentless form” (140). And this dual nature of form – as one of the centers of “literariness” and as a socially charged concept – lets writers explore religious controversies without abandoning their aesthetic interests.

Victorian literature is deeply conscious of form’s power to be both literary and social all at once. And it is no surprise that, in a world where differentiation has fractured the social order and reshaped the way its parts connect to one another, writers eagerly seek out form as a means of making connections once again. Critics have long argued that form becomes a more pressing problem in historical moments of perceived crisis. As early as Lukács and his Theory of the Novel, in its argument that the novel form is “an expression of ... transcendental homelessness” (41), form has been deeply connected to ways of life – and just as deeply
connected to the moments when those modes of life change. Lukács even grounds art as a self-conscious practice in its knowledge that it is “one sphere among many,” a set of forms that “have to produce out of themselves all that was once simply accepted as given” (38). Even if he overstates the sense of totality before civilization’s “fall” (it’s hard to imagine his sense of ancient Greek unity as anything other than an idealization), Lukács still has much to offer us with these suggestions. He reminds us that form becomes an urgent topic when art cannot take the order of the world for granted. It is no surprise, then, that Victorian literature pushes form in any number of possible directions—since form lets literature connect to the increasingly differentiated world around it.

Consequently, this dissertation will side with much recent work in literary studies and literary theory—such as E. Warwick Slinn’s *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Criticism*, which shows how “poetry may enact a cultural critique through its self-conscious formalism” (1), and Susan Wolfson’s *Formal Charges*, which demonstrates that “Romanticism’s involvement with poetic form, in its contentious theorizing and in divergent practices, participates in central discussions of its historical moment” (30)—by arguing that texts are not simply passive carriers of ideology or historical content. As the language of problems, possibilities, and strategies implies, my readings will argue that writers and texts should be understood as active participants in creating meaning, not symptoms of an ideology they cannot understand. Form, in my account, is a problem-solving tool and not the site of a political unconscious or the host of an ideological parasite; as I hope to demonstrate, Victorian novelists and poets show a consistent awareness of the literary and cultural implications that their formal choices have. I will thus be taking to heart Rita Felski’s claim that literary texts are “sources of knowledge” as well as “objects of
knowledge” (7), cultural products that “summon up new ways of seeing” instead of merely being “echoes or distortions of predetermined political truths” (10). This claim does not insist that writers were always fully conscious of the strategies they chose and their implications, but it does not need to, just as the choice of a chess opening does not require the player to understand the implications of every possible move. I do, however, aim to show that the novelists and poets I examine are quite aware of how their formal experimentation enacts their ideas on religious practice.

**Accommodating Modernity: What Literature Tells Us About Differentiation**

But just as understanding differentiation helps us better understand literature, so too does understanding literature help clarify or resolve problems in differentiation theory. For the differentiation thesis is not just an argument about how we became modern; it also diagnoses the benefits and dangers that modernity brings. I argue that just as understanding differentiation improves our knowledge of literary form, examining literature’s interaction with other social spheres helps clarify the problems and possibilities differentiation brings. Scholars have long argued, of course, that modernity should be understood as “highly ambivalent” (Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* 338). Consequently, differentiation, according to Habermas and others, should not be embraced wholeheartedly. Habermas concedes that differentiation leads to a valuable clarification within fields that brings real benefits – an “increase in knowledge that is hard to dispute” (340), as anyone who has ever typed on a computer or received antibiotics can understand. But it also, he claims, brings troubling problems. Habermas argues that the Enlightenment hope was that differentiation would lead to “the rational organization of everyday social life” (“Modernity” 9); instead, he fears,
differentiation’s emphasis on autonomous spheres creates a process of “cultural rationalization” (9), impoverishing the world of everyday life and cutting off specialized fields from their connection with one another. At its worst, differentiation allows autonomous spheres to wreak havoc on the world, so engaged with their own problems that they serve horrific, not beneficial ends. Habermas hopes to carry forward the Enlightenment project through what he calls communicative reason, which he sees as a tool for consolidating the gains of differentiation without falling prey to its very real dangers. Communicative reason wages a battle on two fronts, defending itself from “the totalitarian characteristics of an instrumental reason that objectifies everything around it ... and from the totalizing characteristics of an inclusive reason that incorporates everything and, as a unity, ultimately triumphs over every distinction” (Philosophical Discourse 341).

Habermas sees literature and art as a symptom of differentiation run wild, arguing that art “alienated itself from life and withdrew into the untouchableness of complete autonomy” ("Modernity” 10). And while he is suspicious of this alienation, he is not sympathetic to anti-aesthetic projects that aim to destroy “art” as it is currently understood. He argues that the surrealists aimed “to blow up the autarkical sphere of art and to force a reconciliation of art and life” (10), with meager results. Instead of improving the world by returning art to it, Habermas claims, this experiment simply reinforced the separation of art and life. The sense of separation – a situation where art shows “the irreconcilable nature of the aesthetic and the social world” (10) – cannot be overcome by provocative gestures. The attempt to “level art and life” (10), Habermas suggests, would not have succeeded even if the realm of autonomous art had been shattered. “When the containers of an autonomously developed social
sphere are shattered,” he claims, “the contents get dispersed” (10). Even if one social sphere disappears, its particular problems would be redistributed to other spheres. Differentiation and rationalization, it seems, cannot be easily undone, and it wouldn’t necessarily be a good idea to do so – there are real advantages alongside the serious problems. Art, Habermas claims, needs to be “carried out in the form of a specialized treatment of autonomous problems” (12) in order to remain vital and active. It seems, on this account, that we are stuck with both the advantages and problems of differentiation.

For Habermas, communicative reason helps maintain the benefits of modernity while avoiding its potential for catastrophe. Art can partake in this process by playing a very different game – one where “an experience is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems” (12). In other words, art can avoid the pitfall of rationalization when its consumers use it for non-aesthetic ends. But Habermas’s gloomy view of the artistic sphere relies on his assumption that art has been sharply differentiated from the world around it. And this assumption is due for another look. While some degree of differentiation is undeniable and desirable, it seems apparent that the literary field has not been as rationalized as Habermas would have us believe. If language and literary form is by its very nature drawn from the world, as a dialogic theory of language implies, then its differentiation is always partial, never complete. Literature is not simply waiting for a reader to drag it back into everyday life, as Habermas suggests; rather, it is always a meeting place for aesthetic and social problems. Oddly enough, Habermas grants that literary criticism has “the job of mediating between expert culture and everyday world” (Philosophical Discourse 207), but not literature – even though literature, he concedes, is “already formulated in the medium of language” (208).
It becomes clear that Habermas’s repeated formula for referring to the artistic sphere – “autonomous art” (Theory of Communicative Action 1.160) – obscures more than it reveals. In fact, he concedes at the very end of the Theory of Communicative Action that “post-avant-garde art is characterized by the coexistence of tendencies toward realism and engagement with those authentic continuations of classical modern art that distilled out the independent logic of the aesthetic” (2.398). This is a bigger concession than it might seem. If differentiation produces an artistic sphere where realism and social engagement mingle freely with aesthetics, it cannot be called fully autonomous art. Nor is Habermas’s argument that this is a new development after modern art convincing; after all, Romantic and Victorian literature alike aim to combine aesthetics and social realism or engagement. It seems that purely autonomous art is an exception to the standard of quasi-autonomous, partially differentiated art (even granting for the sake of argument that art whose medium is language could achieve pure autonomy). Literary form serves both aesthetic and ideological or rhetorical purposes in partially differentiated art, allowing literary texts to take part in the artistic sphere even as they reach beyond their own boundaries and examine the wider world. Partially differentiated literature does not necessarily need the “bridging function” (Philosophical Discourse 208) that Habermas locates entirely in art criticism; it already connects to other fields through formal experimentation.

Literature’s emphasis on partial differentiation – its ability to include other social problems in the field of art – makes it a powerful tool for negotiating the problems of rationalization. Victorian writers let their formal choices incorporate material beyond the scope of a pure aesthetics – particularly when literature addresses religion, another field famous for overstepping its supposed boundaries. Its balancing act, juggling the competing claims of
aesthetics and other fields, is not a flaw or a sign of undesirable “impurity.” It is, instead, literature’s great merit. Habermas holds out hope that the “torturous routes along which science, morality, and art communicate with one another” (2.398) will lead to greater communicative reason against the limits of instrumental reason. Literature, it turns out, has been engaged in that communicative project all along. If we understand the role differentiation plays in modernity, we understand the way literary form becomes crucial for seeing how literature secures both aesthetic and rhetorical (or argumentative, theological, political, ideological, and so on) ends. But we also learn how literature and art more generally becomes much more prominent in any discussion of modernity’s gains and losses. It works to fight against the fragmentation differentiation brings even as it uses the freedom that comes with it. Literature emerges as an important tool for thinking of ways that the parts of society, productively but dangerously broken apart, might fit together again.

**Chapter Summaries**

I have chosen the authors studied in these chapters to indicate the enormous number of possibilities and diverse options literary texts had at their disposal. Of course, an exhaustive survey of that diversity would be far beyond the scope of this project, but I hope that even these five writers reveal just how many different strategies existed for working through the problems of secularization. Since I am convinced that prose and poetry generate very different possibilities, I have chosen to examine both in this study – two novelists and three poets. I have also aimed to include a number of different genres: the dramatic monologue, the sonnet, the realist novel, the essay, and the devotional book. It will also be apparent that an enormous number of different possibilities exist within a genre; I will examine very different work within
the realist novel and the dramatic monologue, for instance. And the literary diversity of these writers is matched by the religious diversity: among these writers we can find a cheerfully broad-church Anglican, a deeply conservative Anglo-Catholic, a practical secularist, an admirer of paganism, a highly unconventional and probably unorthodox Christian, and an agnostic/atheist. Just as there is no such thing as the Victorian stance on religion, so too is there no single “Victorian novel” or “Victorian poem.” This lack of consensus is, instead, one of the major sources of the period’s literary vitality.

But one characteristic unites all six of these writers: their conviction that literature, though a distinctive form of writing, can and must speak about the world around it. Whatever their views on religion – some embrace traditional Christianity, others seek to reconfigure Christianity for a new world, and others aim to leave it behind entirely – they share a common belief that literary form can join religious beliefs with artistic ambition. To be sure, literary form always carries implications beyond the aesthetic. But many accounts of how form contains a content of its own – as in Jameson’s model of “formal sedimentation” (140) in which genres carry persistent “socio-symbolic message[s]” (141) – emphasize how conventions contain ideology deep within their cores, often seemingly inaccessible to the writers who use them. And while I do not deny that this sort of sedimentation exists, I would argue that this model has limited utility in accounting for the sort of tentative experiments the Victorians undertook. Instead, the chapters that follow investigate how these writers actively work to discover or create forms that reconnect fragmenting social spheres; since the crisis of secularization is so new and so broad in its effects, no mechanical use of literary form can accomplish this delicate work of adapting to modernity. The possibilities of a secularizing world are extensive, and so are the
formal experiments designed to grapple with those possibilities. Consequently, my attention in the chapters that follow rests with writers who consciously think through the problems of form that they face. All these writers struggle to adapt forms to their own projects, finding a workable set of techniques in the space of possibles they inhabit.

My first chapter surveys Anthony Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* and *Framley Parsonage* to understand why these novels, so engaged with the details of the Church of England, shy away from theological commentary. I argue that Trollope sees differentiation as way to secure a place for literature and religion in everyday life. As the author most concerned about establishing and maintaining boundaries between these activities, Trollope argues that the preservation of the novel and the Church as viable practices outweighs any particular content or belief that these forms can contain. Trollope is devoted to the existence of fiction and the Church of England, and he sees an extensive tolerance of particular content within these activities – different literary subject matter and religious doubt, respectively – as a way to contain conflict without endangering the fundamental health of each institution. Consequently, Trollope becomes an ardent proponent of differentiation, arguing that the novel and the church are each equipped to fulfill distinct ends. Their ethical potential and power – that is, the capacity of the novel and the church to train and shape subjects – depends precisely on their willingness to pursue rationalized, limited ends. Their separation exists alongside a very similar formal structure, capacious yet rigid on matters of their basic survival. Furthermore, I argue that Trollope’s interest in religion and literature as normative institutions has been read in an overly pessimistic and suspicious way. Just as Trollope perceives and embraces the space of possibles in the literary field, he also argues that the novel and the Church of England present an appealing combination of
possibilities and restrictions. Differentiation not only allows religion and literature to fully
develop, Trollope argues, but it allows the subjects who develop under their influence to be
shaped in desirable ways.

If Trollope sees differentiation as a chance to secure a place for religion and fiction,
George Eliot looks forward to a period when religious belief can be left behind. Her fiction and
her views on religion are governed by a common concept: organic form. As I show through
reading her critical essays “The Natural History of German Life” and “Notes on Form in Art,”
Eliot offers a view of organic growth and development that differs from both Victorian liberalism
and Burkean conservatism. She is suspicious of any attempts to expedite or circumvent the
natural growth process of society, but she does not see organic development as something
necessarily desirable. Instead, she looks forward to a point where belief in error or superstition
has reached the end of its development, when it can be safely uprooted. I will examine her
development of this unusual perspective on “organic development” in her earliest and latest
works of fiction, Scenes of Clerical Life and Daniel Deronda, looking at the formal
characteristics – particularly narrative voice – for how she puts this theory of organic growth into
practice. She uses the sketch form in Scenes of Clerical Life to describe a moment when
religious life begins to change, and combines two very different Bildungsroman plots in Daniel
Deronda to show the challenges her own model of secularism might face.

I then turn to poetry for the remaining three chapters. Robert Browning, I will argue,
uses the dramatic monologue as a tool for exploring how religious faith is contextual and
holistic. Although Browning is often read as a poet who undermines naive belief, I argue that he
uses the dramatic monologue to explore how mental schemes and belief systems adapt to change.
His interests do not lie in defending a particular version of Christianity, but in exploring the ways in which belief is shaped by pre-existing commitments or thoughts. Likewise, he uses the form to explore how belief can accommodate challenges and new discoveries, thinking through the problems that new knowledge presents without wholly abandoning the preconceptions that a speaker brings to the world. The dramatic monologue, as a genre that opens the lyric to history, becomes an ideal tool for examining what W. V. O. Quine calls the web of belief. I thus argue against the common interpretations of Browning’s poetry that see his work as a skeptical response to naive belief. Instead, I argue, Browning aims to explore the subtle variations and modifications of belief that became an urgent issue in an age of rapid secularization. I will examine, alongside his letters and the “Essay on Shelley,” three of his famous monologues – “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” “An Epistle of Karshish, the Arab Physician,” and “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” – as well as his later, underrated long poem Fifine at the Fair.

But the dramatic monologue, as Algernon Charles Swinburne and Augusta Webster prove, could be turned to far different ends. In the next chapter I explore how Swinburne and Webster, against a convention that has come to be seen as a requirement for the dramatic monologue, tend to write monologues that downplay irony. While Browning examines how belief changes, Swinburne and Webster are interested in using the monologue to let alternate perspectives on religion be heard. I examine how both poets stress the valid perspective of religious views that cannot be assimilated to Victorian Christianity, no matter how tolerant the church becomes. And I investigate why these two poets, so similar in their lack of irony, are radically different stylistically and thematically: Swinburne offers pagan speakers in ornate, highly wrought verse, while Webster uses a deliberately plain style to present contemporary
agnosticism as the position of a sensible, honest individual in a world where faith no longer seems plausible. Swinburne’s bombast and grandeur inflate the perspectives he offers, dramatizing the attractions of religious perspectives far outside the conventions of Victorian Britain. Webster takes the opposite tack, deflating pragmatic skepticism to the level of everyday common sense and making it, not Christian faith, seem like the natural default position for her readers.

Finally, I turn to Christina Rossetti and her interest in using poetry to defend her Anglo-Catholic brand of Christianity. In this chapter I focus on the sonnet as a tool for creating devotional poetry. The long history of the form as both a secular and religious type of poetry, I argue, makes it an ideal tool for Rossetti, who desires to reject secular values and pursuits in favor of religious life. Furthermore, the constraints and restrictions imposed on the sonnet’s form mirror the self-restraint that Rossetti sees as fundamental to a life of Christian devotion; in fact, to accentuate this sense of devotional restraint, her sonnets adopt a deliberately repetitive language to mimic the repetition of Christian liturgy and devotion. I offer a reading of a number of Rossetti’s sonnets throughout her career, aiming to dispel the commonly-held view that Rossetti’s Christian poetry is a disappointing and feeble collapse from the vigor and power of her earlier work like “Goblin Market.” I explore, instead, how Rossetti’s poetic skill and interest in repetition – stylistically and thematically – crafts a powerful and particularly interesting defense of Anglican tradition. Finally, I return to “Goblin Market,” a poem critics have often considered the brilliant anomaly in Rossetti’s work, to show how this recurring interest in repetition and discipline appears throughout her entire career.
In all these chapters, I hope to demonstrate how these five authors meet the challenges of secularization by imaginatively exploring the resources and possibilities of literature. The intersection of literature and religion, as two partially differentiated and interpenetrating fields, allows the formal strategies and techniques of literature to address literary and religious problems at one stroke. The diversity of the imaginative solutions and perspectives on religion testifies to the Victorian period’s expanding pluralism. And the concept of fields, and the possibilities they create, restores to us a sense of literature’s active agency in thinking through the problems of its world. All five of these writers offer powerful responses to increasing secularization, providing inventive strategies for thinking about literature and religion alike. What I hope to show, then, is not just how five particularly skilled novelists and poets used literature to address religious pluralism and secularism, but also the startling and diverse possibilities with Victorian literature, and its power to bridge two very different social spheres. Finally, the example of Victorian literature suggests that differentiation, far from being a social development largely divorced from human agency, was alternately embraced, contested, and accommodated by those who lived through it. A careful study of this literature shows how nineteenth-century writers rose to the challenges of modernity, working to ameliorate its problems and secure its gains.
Moderate Schism and Comfortable Forms: Trollope Rationalizes the Novel

Of all the novelists and poets examined here, Anthony Trollope is the most explicitly concerned with the problems of differentiation. The Chronicles of Barsetshire series puts secularization on center stage, examining its role in a modernizing England. And it also investigates one differentiating institution by means of another: the realist novel, a mode of writing developing its own grammar, preoccupations, and values. In both cases, Trollope emerges as a qualified defender of modernity, promoting a stable future for the church and novel alike. He argues that both fiction and the Church of England serve complementary purposes, offering distinctive forms of ethical instruction. For Trollope, the best way to preserve these institutions lies in embracing the logic of differentiation: placing clear, specialized functions at the center of each field while keeping his eye on the boundaries that govern both the literary and religious spheres. These specialized functions, he argues, are best served through conventional forms, standardized enough to be recognizable and flexible enough to incorporate a wide variety of lived experience. Formally, his fiction embraces the plot conventions of realism and uses his famous narrative digressions to comment, approvingly, on their predictability. He transforms plot into ritual, and narration into a secular sermon, so he can make his novels a reliable form of ethical instruction. On the level of content, Trollope’s novels conceal or disregard theological subject matter, partly out of a respect for professional autonomy and partly to elevate the church’s ethical values over its doctrinal commitments. Trollope, then, works toward a rationalized novel that imagines a rationalized church, each secure in their place under secularization. He envisions both the Church of England and the novel as forms that can accommodate the “moderate schism” of reasonable disagreement, theological and literary, with
And he works to make the logic of his chosen field, fiction, as clear to readers as it was to him.

Trollope’s fiction thus participates in a debate that has occupied literary studies for generations: the question of whether, and to what extent, the realist novel embraces or rejects secularism. For many scholars, realist fiction depends on secularization to exist at all. Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* argued that formal realism needed “a measure of secularisation” as an “indispensable condition” (84) for coming into being. In this account, the characteristics we think of as integral to the realist novel – an emphasis on “individual experience,” a relative “absence of formal conventions,” and a “rejection of traditional plots” (Watt 13) – develop in response to secularization and a philosophical emphasis on the individual subject. Other major accounts of the novel follow in Watt’s footsteps; Michael McKeon, for instance, links the “early modern crisis of secularization” (64) and its aftermath to the novel’s “formal tension between what might be called the individual life and the overarching pattern” (90). Most recently, George Levine has argued that “Victorian realist fiction is a fundamentally secular form” (19), albeit one characterized by a “constant tension between the conventions and intentions of its worldliness and its entirely understandable aspirations beyond the worldly” (210). Conversely, recent scholarship has also argued that realism owes more to religion than these critics have acknowledged. Amy M. King has recently argued that novelistic description borrows “a descriptive mode that was particularly suited to the requirements of natural theology” (461), and Colin Jager has also shown Romanticism’s debt to natural theology.

The *Chronicles of Barsetshire* novels, I will argue, attempt to reconcile these opposing positions. Trollope accepts the logic of secularization but does so in order to secure religion’s
place in modernity. He reminds us that secularization equates neither to “religious decline nor the privatization of religion” (Jager 1). Instead, Trollope argues, religion’s future is best served by embracing secularization, locking it into a secure social niche. And the forms of his novels reflect this desire to preserve religion without encroaching on its territory. Consequently, Trollope’s fiction uses secularized means – as Watt, McKeon, and Levine indicate – for a purpose that reinforces religious ends. In a sense, this reverses King’s argument about fictional description, which contains “the residue of the sacred” in a form that is “purely secular” (465) in theme. Trollope, by contrast, uses quotidian, deliberately formulaic plots to support Christian ethics without invading religion’s territory. Meanwhile, his intrusive narration is an example of what Amanda Anderson calls Trollope’s “liberal and communicative principle of honesty” (525): it makes the accomplishments and goals of literary conventions clear to his readers, and by making these conventions transparent (without disavowing them), it rationalizes realist fiction. His novels preserve religion’s increasing autonomy, and reinforce the sense that fiction has its own unique role to play, while discovering an overlapping ethical project that the church and the novel share.

But Trollope’s embrace of conventional forms, and his careful avoidance of theological ideas, has led readers to underestimate his project’s ambition. Trollope was, after all, a novelist who happily describes his own fiction in his Autobiography as, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s description, “just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting that they were being made a show of” (144). In this account, artifice disappears from Trollope’s fiction; his role seems to be limited to putting characters on display underneath a transparent medium.
Critics from the Victorian period to the present day have often agreed that Trollope’s novels, though they depict everyday life in exhaustive detail, avoid formal innovation or sophisticated ideas. *Barchester Towers*, for instance, was praised in *The Times* for being “told without any attempt at fine writing” (5), and the *British Quarterly Review*’s positive assessment of *The Last Chronicle of Barset* conceded that Trollope “seldom approaches eloquence” (306). Meanwhile, *Framley Parsonage* was dismissively compared by the *Westminster Review* to “a sensible after-dinner speech” where “we are never alarmed by an appeal to our powers of thought” (133).

Henry James, always exceptional, managed to take both positions over the course of his life. He could review Trollope’s novel *The Belton Estate* and dismiss him as “a good observer; but ... literally nothing else” (258), and then return to Trollope sympathetically in *Partial Portraits* by praising his “appreciation of the usual” (101) – a “happy, instinctive perception of human varieties” which was “not reasoned nor acquired, not even particularly studied” (104). And later scholarship on Trollope has continued this trend; as Margaret Markwick and Deborah Denenholz Morse note, “seasoned commentators have long quibbled about whether Trollope was worthy of serious study” (1). In these accounts, Trollope’s work is formally unaccomplished, interesting as a window onto Victorian society and little more.

Against this trend, I will argue that if we wish to understand Trollope’s fiction for what it is – an ambitious effort to imagine fiction and religion as vital forces in a secularizing world – we must learn to see the difficulty of his task. And it is here that this chapter connects one

---

8 For two influential examples, see Bradford A. Booth’s study of Trollope, still widely cited after half a century, which claims in its introduction that Trollope’s fiction “resists the kind of formal analysis to which we subject our better fiction” (ix). Booth argues that “in the novels he normally contented himself with careful observation” (26). Or see Ruth apRoberts’ *The Moral Trollope*, which declares that Trollope “is the least symbolic of novelists; he is least of a ‘stylist’; and he exhibits little of those technical excellences that formalists admire beyond all else” (15-16).
discussion in Victorian studies (the impact of secularization on literature) to another: a growing sense that Trollope’s formal accomplishments have been underestimated. Lauren Goodlad, Carolyn Dever, and Nicholas Dames have spearheaded a reassessment of Trollope’s formal accomplishments, declaring, in Goodlad’s words, that “Trollope’s formal innovativeness has been too long overlooked” (851). All three discover formal innovation within elements of Trollope’s fiction that often appear, at first glance, deeply conventional or simply insignificant – pointing, correctly, to sophistication hiding within the conventional forms. Dames, for instance, highlights Trollope’s use of “one of the most simple, homely of categories ... the chapter” (855); Dever argues that Trollope “exposed the creaky machinery of mid-Victorian realism” (861); and Goodlad focuses on *The Eustace Diamonds* and the “supplementary mutations” (868) that emerge alongside his familiar realism. My argument develops along similar lines, as I investigate the theories behind Trollope’s familiar plots and prominent narration. But while I agree with these critics that Trollope’s conventions hide surprising inventiveness, I do not claim that he subverts these conventions – unlike Dever, I do not see Trollope’s use of comfortably worn narratives and a self-advertising narrator as an attempt to “transcend the mean conventions of narrative” (864). Instead, I will argue, Trollope seeks to validate those conventions even as he exposes them. As with the machinery of the church he describes, Trollope views his fictional forms as capacious and rational enough to survive whatever scrutiny comes their way. He does not undermine conventions; instead, he thinks through their implications and uses them anyway, confident that they serve reasonable ends. Furthermore, I contend that Trollopian form must be understood as an outgrowth of secularization: religion and literature are united, without violating the process of differentiation, by a shared embrace of convention as a sound mechanism for
achieving a shared set of ethical goals. Trollope turns conventions into procedures: clear, familiar practices that consistently produce desired ends.

* 

For Trollope, the project of carving out distinct niches for fiction and religion becomes a lifelong task: in a metaphor he returns to again and again, a career. The career, as Nicholas Dames argues, is a product of modernization; it is “a mediating, even domesticating figure for social energy, making of ‘vocations’ or ‘ambitions’ a path more amenable to rationalization” (249). Rationalization is inseparably linked to differentiation; it implies clarifying the purpose, methods, and procedures that govern and shape a particular sphere or field. Differentiated spheres become clearly distinct, in fact, when they have “developed complexes of rationality with their own logics” (Habermas 1.249). Hence highly rationalized careers only make sense in a highly differentiated world – and Trollope, who embraces the career as a plot device, theme, and way of conceptualizing his own writing, enthusiastically embraces this logic of differentiation. As Dames claims, the rationalized career might well be the Trollope subject: whether writing about clergymen, politicians, or others, he examines “the mechanisms of how a ‘career’ shapes, disciplines, and makes socially workable the desires and ambitions that (supposedly) precede it” (252). The career, Dames argues, becomes a Trollopian plot device, one which manages expectations and steps along a predetermined path of success. In a compelling reading of Trollope’s Palliser novels, Dames argues that the career plot allows Trollope to focus on “a given career’s inner logic, specific procedures, and various subordinate career paths” (252). This plot directs the energies and ambitions of his characters into well-organized structures.
Dames specifically examines the political career (Phineas Finn) and the Civil Service (The Three Clerks). But Trollope interprets both clergymen and novelists as professionals working in a well-defined occupation. His thoughts on Christianity are most clearly spelled out in his Clergymen of the Church of England, a series of essays he wrote just before publishing The Last Chronicle of Barset. The title itself indicates Trollope’s particular interests: he emphasizes the institution and its “employees,” not any doctrinal position or particular religious belief. Each essay focuses on a particular office within the Church, such as “The Modern English Archbishop” and “The Parson of the Parish.” Throughout the work, two recurring themes emerge that clearly indicate Trollope’s conception of religion in rationalized, differentiated terms: his insistence that clergymen should be held to the same standards of professionalization as other fields, and his willingness to defer judgment on theological issues to the Church’s certified experts. Trollope’s interest lies in seeing the Church of England run smoothly; as Ruth apRoberts notes in her introduction, Trollope “leans toward the dismissing of matters of dogma and theology as non-essential” (<15>). (In fact, “leans toward” is an understatement; Trollope has almost nothing to say about Christianity as a set of beliefs.) He is happy to leave the doctrinal disputes to the experts in the field, as long as their arguments don’t get in the way of the profession.

Trollope insists on treating clergymen as professionals, with the duties and obligations that apply to any career. In one of his more disapproving essays, “The College Fellow Who Has Taken Orders,” he expresses his opposition to the practice of giving livings to college fellows without subjecting them to a “training” process. And he claims that this practice only makes sense to those who think that “the profession of a clergyman is unlike any other trade or calling
known, requiring for the due performance of its duties no special fitness, no training, no skill, no
practice, no thought, and no preparation” (86). Trollope finds it preposterous not to treat the
Church of England as a profession like any other; although the forms that job training takes
differ from organization to organization, the underlying value of professionalism remains. As in
any profession, he claims, there is a need for rationalization and logical internal procedures. It is
laughable, Trollope suggests, that anyone would believe that “in this business of the cure of
souls, and in this business only, there were no necessity for that progress in skill and
efficiency” (88). Even his perception of abuses in the Church of England is colored by his
emphasis on rationalized professionalism. He objects to the practice of overworking underpaid
curates, for instance, and does so by criticizing the fact that “no clergyman in our Church has, as
yet, taken it into his head that there should be any analogy, or any proportion, between work and
wages in his profession, as there is such analogy and such proportion in all other
professions” (93-4). Efficiency, training, progressive improvement: these are, for Trollope,
ideals of the career that apply to all professions, including the Church of England.

And unlike the other novelists and poets I examine in this study, Trollope goes out of his
way to marginalize problems of theological content. When doctrinal issues appear, Trollope
waves them off; as Mark Turner argues, he “never really attacks the doctrines of clergymen and
refrains from discussing the finer points of dogma” (53). He argues, for instance, that when
bishops are selected “it would be well if High Church, Low Church, and Broad Church could be
allowed to have their turns in rotation” (26) – a sentence that could never have appeared Eliot’s
polemics against evangelicals or Christina Rossetti’s Anglo-Catholic devotional prose. In fact,
his last essay in Clergymen of the Church of England focuses on “The Clergyman Who
Subscribes for Colenso,” a controversial figure who had scandalized the Church of England with his conclusion that “the historical account of the Exodus ‘is not historically true’” (Larsen 62). Trollope’s treatment of this issue is revealing: this is the only essay in the book that examines theological controversies in any detail, and Trollope is anxious to change the subject. He downplays the significance of belief by claiming that “most men who call themselves Christians would say that they believed the Bible, not knowing what they meant, never having attempted, – and very wisely having refrained from attempting amidst the multiplicity of their worldly concerns, – to separate historical record from inspired teaching” (124-5). In fact, he goes so far to claim that there are few “among us who, in this matter of our own religion, which of all things is the most important to us, could take pen in hand and write down even for their own information exactly what they themselves believe” (124). And when forced to discuss theology, Trollope has no qualms about granting that Colenso and his followers have a point. He is happy to concede “the incompatibility of the teaching of Old Testament records with the new teachings of the rocks and stones” (125), and he finds it absurd that churchgoers and clergymen recite the “fulminating clause” of the Athanasian Creed which “tells us that nobody can be saved unless he believes a great deal which we find impossible to understand” (125). Trollope’s objection to these radical clergymen lies not in the content of their belief – which he either endorses or ignores – but in his sense that they are not good team players. Other clergymen, he says, dislike these radical beliefs but “hate more intensely that want of professional thoroughness, that absence of esprit de corps, which these gentlemen seem to them to exhibit” (122). For Trollope, the problem with this revisionist interpretation of Christianity is not its inherent content but its
potential to cause problems for the institution as a whole. Excessive arguing over theology is like sand in the gears of the Church’s machinery.

Of course, rationalization is not a process that defuses argument or debate within a differentiated sphere. Far from it: differentiation allocates different forms of reason to various separate social spheres, making it possible for them to concentrate on a specific set of problems. It focuses fields on a clear set of problems, so that they can be addressed and possibly solved. So why does Trollope consistently minimize the role of doctrine? There are, I think, several reasons. To begin, differentiation works by removing particular sets of problems and forms of reason from “religious-metaphysical worldviews” (Habermas 1.165), so that they might be better addressed by those working in that sphere. Religion does, however, still lay claim to “a principled ethic with its universalistic demands” (Habermas 1.166). And the doctrinal arguments Trollope mentions and dismisses are only tangentially related to this ethical mission. Controversies over the correct way to interpret the Bible, as Trollope notes, quickly spill over the proper boundaries of the church and into scientific and historical spheres – and Trollope respects differentiation too much to approve of this move. Trollope is also confident that any doctrinal problems can be resolved within the institution over time; there is never any doubt in his mind that the Church of England, in its benign and tolerant mode, can absorb any reasonable theological controversy with ease. Social spheres can handle moderate dissent, in his view, but they should not tolerate challenges to their own existence, as the controversies of the period threatened. Finally, Trollope extends a sort of professional courtesy to the clergymen of the Church of England. As someone who has not made the Church his career, he assumes that other professions are as complex and difficult as his. Reluctant to wade into theological matters too
deep for his understanding, Trollope instead advocates a consistent professional standard and encourages the church to focus on its ethical teaching instead of obscurity or pedantry.

Trollope’s view of the Church as a rationalized profession matches his view of his own literary career. The “career” of a politician or clergyman, of course, is much more regulated and predictable than the career of the novelist. But it would be going too far to say, as Dames does, that Trollope’s own work exists “outside the bureaucratized career-world” (Dames 250) of his characters. Trollope, in fact, is eager to conceive of his work in very similar terms. Trollope’s conception of novel-writing as a job violates every Romantic dictum that views writers as prophets or unacknowledged legislators of the world. In his Autobiography, in fact, Trollope seems to go out of his way to equate his work with any other respectable profession. Explaining his enormous output, he declares that he “was moved now by a determination to excel, if not in quality, at any rate in quantity” (122) – as though he were the literary equivalent of an assembly line. Anticipating readers’ objections that this is an “ignoble ambition,” he defends his goal as perfectly valid if “an author can bring himself to look at his work as does any other workman” (122). This equation between novelists and other professionals continues throughout the Autobiography. Trollope argues that the artist should be as attentive to financial reward as “a barrister, a clergyman, a doctor, [or] an engineer” (105). And he refuses to believe in any idea of waiting for artistic inspiration before getting to work, announcing that “to me it would not be more absurd if the shoemaker were to wait for inspiration, or the tallow-chandler for the divine moment of melting” (121). This logic continues to the end of the Autobiography, where he refuses to “lay claim to any literary excellence” but insists upon “whatever merit should be
accorded to me for persevering diligence in my profession” (364). The novelist, in other words, is not an inspired prophet but a craftsman. Shoemakers make shoes and novelists make novels.

It is significant that Trollope prefaces his theory of the novel in his *Autobiography* by stating that he wished to write a defense of the novel “to vindicate my own profession as a novelist, and also to vindicate that public taste in literature which has created and nourished the profession which I follow” (216). By clarifying the purpose of his profession, Trollope aims to secure a respectable space for it in the public mind. There is nothing revolutionary about his theory of the novel; in fact, it largely develops the Horatian dictum that literature should delight and instruct. Trollope declares that “the writer of stories must please, or he will be nothing. And he must teach whether he wish to teach or no” (222). Other elements of novel-writing – style, plot, characterization – exist in order to further those goals, and Trollope is particularly non-dogmatic about how to accomplish them. He argues, for instance, that the distinction between realistic and sensational novels is unproductive, since “a good novel should be both, and both in the highest degree” (227). The plot(characterization) binary is dissolved in favor of a concept – story – that unites both; Trollope argues that plot is “but the vehicle” (126) for characterization but concedes that “there must, however, be a story. You must provide a vehicle of some sort” (126). And literary style, Trollope argues, should “be as ready and as efficient a conductor of the mind of the writer to the mind of the reader as is the electric spark which passes from one battery to [another] battery” (235). But beyond this emphasis on clarity, Trollope is willing to include quite a bit under the banner of “pleasant” (234) style; he offers no specific advice to the novelist beyond a claim that he or she should be “intelligible” and “harmonious” (234). His
central purpose of moral instruction and pleasure guides all his discussion of what a novel should be.

Several similarities emerge between Trollope’s view of the Church of England and his view of novel-writing. Both, in his view, are professions, not mysterious callings immune to outside scrutiny. Both should be approached from a latitudinarian mindset, with a great deal of tolerance for disagreement within the context of shared goals. And both share a similar ethical and pedagogical purpose. Trollope, in fact, is happy to acknowledge the similarities between the two. Opposing those who regard novelists as “those who pander to the wicked pleasures of a wicked world” (146), Trollope claims that “I have ever thought of myself as a preacher of sermons, and my pulpit as one which I could make both salutary and agreeable to my audience” (146). This is a comparison he makes in several other parts of the Autobiography. When he receives a letter from a clergyman who objects to the plot of Can You Forgive Her?, for instance, Trollope asks him “whether from his pulpit, or at any rate from his communion-table, he did not denounce adultery to his audience; and if so, why it should not be open to me to preach the same doctrine to mine” (182). And he argues that “the novelist, if he have a conscience, must preach his sermons with the same purpose as the clergyman, and must have his own system of ethics” (222). Both fiction and the Church of England, for Trollope, share a broadly understood pedagogical mission and stand to benefit from the same process of rationalization. But each should differentiate itself by focusing on their broad ethical purpose,

---

9 Turner, discussing this passage, argues that for Trollope “the novelist becomes the preacher, replacing the clergyman in an increasingly secular society” (57). Although I argue here that Trollope does not reject religion’s authority but instead posits the novel as an alternative instructing mechanism working alongside the church, this difference in interpretation makes it clear how secularization – the subset of differentiation – easily blurs into secularism – the removal or displacement of religion. George Eliot’s fiction reinforces that connection, while Trollope’s novels resist it.
without being distracted by doctrinal or aesthetic controversies. The novel, like the Church of England, should insist on its ethical objectives, develop rationalized career paths in accordance with those principles, and remain tolerant of internal controversy and disagreement.

It is this ethical purpose, Trollope claims, that drives his pursuit of realism in fiction. Even Trollope’s famous commitment to a realist portrayal of society, the presentation of life “under a glass case” (144), should be understood as a product of his ethical interests. By aiming to present everyday English life, Trollope shows characters who his readers “might recognise [as] human beings like to themselves, and not feel themselves to be carried away among gods and demons” (145). Doing so will convince his readers of the moral platitudes one might find, albeit in a less entertaining form, in a sermon: “honesty is the best policy ... truth prevails while falsehood fails” (145), and so forth. These lessons may seem alarmingly trite. But Trollope is confident that the presentation of everyday life is enough to teach the reader – the ethical lessons that a reader infers from the text is entirely due to Trollope’s skill with character and plot. Realistic characterization and a plot that demonstrates the consequences of particular choices, along with a narrator who cheerfully intrudes to reinforce the narrative’s implications, prove to be a sound basis for Trollope’s own “sermons.” Nothing about this is particularly surprising. But this “broad church” theory of the novel does not quite fit the realist formula that places detailed observation over all else. Instead of choosing character over plot, for instance, Trollope insists that you need both at once. Nor is he committed to realism over sensation fiction, despite the fact that his novels are rarely classified as the latter. Trollope consistently undermines the contrasts that Watt uses to define formal realism. His main concern lies in securing literature’s
basic capacity for pleasure and instruction at once, not in dogmatically following a realist program.

Hence Trollope’s view of the literary field does not focus on “pure aesthetics,” as Habermas and Bourdieu’s statements about “autonomous artistic spheres” would imply. The word “autonomous” is only defensible in this context if it simply means that Trollope does not make fiction subservient to other social spheres. Certainly, Trollope is eager to claim that fiction is a profession with its own goals, methods, and so on. But while Trollope embraces the artistic aims of fiction, he couples them to his unapologetic interest in moral instruction. Pleasure may remain one of the defining characteristics of fiction, but he has no interest in confining his novels to an aesthetic realm. Consequently, Trollope takes an ambivalent position on the process of differentiation: while he enthusiastically embraces the rationalized, professionalized concept of the career, his view of literature’s balance between entertainment and instruction emerges out of a long, decidedly pre-modern tradition. As a result, it might be tempting to downplay the genuine novelty in Trollope’s fiction, his interest in rationalized careers and social spheres. But this problem disappears when the argument for pure aesthetics and differentiation falls apart. Instead, Trollope emerges as a dedicated proponent of a partially differentiated literary sphere, one that can legitimately lay claim to the aesthetic even as it reaches into ethical and social criticism. This sort of ambivalence – positioning literature on the borders of other differentiated spheres and everyday life all at once – means that his theory of fiction must accommodate several forms of thought, most importantly pleasure and ethical knowledge, all at once.

Trollope theorizes his own work as that of a skilled professional working in a coherent field, literature, that weds entertaining fiction to ethical instruction. The Chronicles of
Barsetshire novels take on two major problems that emerge from this theory of literature. First, they aim to make the logic of the fictional career transparent. As in his autobiography, where the craft of fiction becomes as prosaic and transparent as possible, Trollope’s novels present the literary career as a practice where the writer makes good use of standardized conventions. His solution to the problem of fiction in a secularizing world follows a path described by McKeon and Levine, one that seeks common ground between conventional forms and realistic characterization. In fact, Trollope is perfectly happy with the artifice of plot; James Kincaid observes that “surely no one adhered more closely to conventional narrative designs than Trollope” (24). In Barchester Towers, there’s never any real doubt that the comic ending will come together neatly: Mr. Slope will be removed from the world of Barsetshire somehow, Eleanor Bold will dodge the threats posed by lesser suitors in favor of Arabin, and so on. Trollope might be best understood as someone who uses the standard repertory of comic novels – the marriage plot, most obviously – because they have proven to be reliable tools. These plots act as machinery that lets him observe his characters and reveal the consequences of their choices. And he is so confident in the value of these conventions that he frequently remarks on them in a metafictional, digressive commentary. Meanwhile, his novels typically pair these conventional plots with an ethical dilemma (in Barchester Towers, “How will Barsetshire deal with an unwelcome new bishop and his aggressively evangelical wife and chaplain?”; in Framley Parsonage, “What happens when a clergyman makes unwise and unethical financial decisions?”), matching the pleasure of reliable plots with the ethical questions raised by sharply observed characterization. Trollope’s interests lie in seeing how his characters live within the familiar
plots that surround them; his brand of realism is one that links richly observed characters to reliable conventions.

The second problem addressed by Trollope’s novels is the need to make sure literature’s partial differentiation never encroaches on the religious world he describes. While he places ethics at the heart of his fiction, he also insists on distinguishing his fiction from sermons or religious education. The novel and the Church of England may have similar moral imperatives, but they are not identical. He takes his assertion above that the novelist should have his own system of ethics seriously. Asked to submit a novel for a religious magazine, Good Words, Trollope responds that he “could not undertake to write either with any specially religious tendency, or in any fashion different from that which was usual to me” (186-8). This reluctance to encroach on the Church of England’s territory pervades Trollope’s novels. In fact, he concludes The Last Chronicle of Barset – and thus the series as a whole – by addressing the critics who accuse him of ignoring the clergyman’s “professional duties ... high calling ... [and] daily workings for the good of those around him” (860). In response to this accusation, Trollope pleads no contest. He declares that his object “has been to paint the social and not the professional lives of clergymen” (860), and that insofar as he has written about the religious duties of clergymen he has “transgressed” (860). The novel aims to delight and instruct through its mastery of fictional conventions and its careful observation of everyday life; it would be overstepping his professional boundaries to comment on the work allocated to the religious career. Thus this deliberate evacuation of religious content in Trollope comes from his commitment to rationalized professionalism. His novels, therefore, work to observe and remove obstacles inhibiting the smooth functioning of each institution, while maintaining a respectful
distance from the religious subject matter that he feels – as a member of a different profession – it would be inappropriate for him to handle. Once these essential functions are secured and the logic that governs them is made clear, Trollope becomes comfortable with any “moderate schism” that occurs.

*Barchester Towers* makes it clear early on that Trollope will observe the Church of England from a distinctly secular perspective. Describing Archdeacon Grantly’s disappointment at not being made bishop, the narrator disagrees with those who “think that he was wicked to grieve for the loss of episcopal power” (I.9). Instead, he advises us not to “look to our clergymen to be more than men” (I.9). And to drive the point home, he poses a rhetorical question: “Our archdeacon was worldly – who among us is not so?” (I.9). Two traits that will persist throughout the novel appear in this passage: Trollope’s notoriously intrusive narrator and his repeated insistence on treating clergymen as professionals like any other. After all, he reasons, ambition can be found in any other profession, as in the examples he names: lawyers, diplomats, and, significantly, novelists (I.9). And if ambition is not blameworthy there, he asks, why should it be condemned in the Church of England? Trollope thus establishes the terms by which readers should approach his novel early on; while he has no intention of devaluing Christian belief or practice, he refuses to treat the Church of England as an institution unlike other professions. In fact, he respects it enough to treat it by the standards he would apply to other social spheres.

Part of treating the church as a profession, for Trollope, means backing away from overt commentary on its practices or beliefs. He insists throughout *Barchester Towers* on downplaying his knowledge of, or opinions about, theology. Early in the novel, he refuses to comment on the
ceremony that officially installs Dr. Proudie as bishop, claiming that “I will not describe the ceremony, as I do not precisely understand its nature” (I.18). And this determined refusal to comment on church practices continues throughout the novel. The narrator refuses to quote any of Mr. Slope’s sermon, saying that “it would not be becoming were I to travestie [sic] a sermon, or even to repeat the language of it in the pages of a novel” (I.49). Including the sermon at all, it seems, would be encroaching on religion’s territory. And in a digression objecting to bad sermons full of “false conclusions from misunderstood texts,” (I.53), the narrator makes a revealing distinction, declaring that he does “believe in those mysteries ... in the unadulterated word which you hold there in your hand,” but considers himself free to doubt a given “interpretation” (I.53) of church doctrine. He concedes that the church must have a set of beliefs at its core, and he acknowledges its source. But he also insists that beliefs must be interpreted, and may be misinterpreted. Significantly, though, the narrator does not offer a single example of the “false conclusions” or misinterpretations; there is no point of theological controversy driving this reflection. He accepts the “mysteries” at the core of the church, leaves open the possibility for disagreement over interpreting them, and quickly dismisses the subject. This deliberate vagueness allows him to focus his energy on the social aspect of the Church of England, leaving theology to its theologians.

It is worth noting that Barchester Towers does enter into the clash between High and Low Church, although in a characteristically tentative way. The narrator makes his preference for the former known, but very reluctantly and cautiously. He states that “if it be essentially and absolutely necessary to choose between the two, we are inclined to agree with Mrs. Grantly that the bell, book, and candle are the lesser evil of the two. Let it however be understood that no
such necessity is admitted in these pages” (II.270). The paragraph begins with several expressions of hesitation (“essentially and absolutely necessary,” “inclined”) that qualify his observation; the first expresses reluctance to make a choice, and the second hesitation to insist firmly on his views. Trollope also frames this assertion as the opinion of one of his characters, distancing himself from his own views; he presents his theological views in the context of reluctant agreement to another’s thought, not his own idea. And having done so, he immediately insists that he sees no reason to enter into the debate at all. Even so, this is a rare statement of religious opinion in a novel that tries to avoid controversy. The narrator has a low opinion of the Low Church, one justified by the plot of Barchester Towers. The novel’s main threat, after all, is Mr. Slope, whose low church beliefs and practices are coupled with a repellent personal manner. And his evangelical position is shared by Mrs. Proudie, a recurring antagonist throughout later novels in the series.

So why does the narrator make this tentative but clear statement of preference? Trollope, while certainly not sympathetic to low-church Anglicanism, objects more to its social consequences than to the doctrine itself. Mr. Slope’s enthusiasm for Sunday observances, for instance, comes from his interest in “that dominion which he loves to exercise over at least a seventh part of man’s allotted time here below” (I.29). Dr. Grantly’s objection is even more revealing. Doctrinal disagreements, he declares, are not particularly problematic; he claims that “it is not the dissenters or the papists that we should fear” (I.44). Instead, he argues that men like Mr. Slope will “make the profession of a clergyman disreputable” (I.44). Mr. Slope’s threat comes not from the details of his doctrine but the bad reputation he imparts to the institution. His enthusiasm for a particular sort of Christianity makes the church seem less attractive.
Barchester, the narrator notes approvingly, “had escaped the taint of any extreme rigour of church doctrine” (I.45), and Mr. Slope challenges this easy consensus. Although he is certainly no radical or extreme reactionary, Mr. Slope threatens the stability of a church that has largely agreed to bracket out theological arguments. The content of his controversial beliefs is not particularly important or problematic, for Trollope; his tendency to discredit the institutional church becomes a much bigger problem.

This suspicion of fiercely-held beliefs might help us understand one of the most famous passages of the novel – Trollope’s approval of “moderate schism.” D. A. Miller rightly observes that this phrase can serve as a neat summary of the ideological and narrative conflicts that drive the novel forward, arguing that moderate schism provides an institution with the means to “maintain itself” (117). It is, in his account, a process that generates interest within the structures that govern the characters – the Church of England and the novel itself – without seriously challenging the foundation of those institutions. The interest in the novel, then, is in representing conflict and problems within the church without ever letting those problems seem intractable or serious enough that the institution itself might be called into question. Tractarian beliefs, for instance, are honored for the interest in religion that they generate; Trollope notes approvingly that this sort of schism “calls attention to the subject, draws in supporters who would otherwise have been inattentive to the matter, and teaches men to think upon religion” (I.188). It is, to put it bluntly, good for business. We are not told to adopt these Tractarian beliefs, merely to admire

---

10 Amanda Anderson argues that Slope’s real crime is that “he insists on explicating the principles that animate his own doctrine and argues against the heavy emphasis on ritual” (518). I agree with Anderson’s second claim but not her first. Slope’s hostility to familiar rituals tells against him, given how comfortable Trollope is with familiar patterns in his fiction, but as his narrator makes clear, Trollope is happy to unveil the principles that underpin conventions. Slope’s error, for Trollope, is his eagerness to abandon perfectly serviceable rituals without a good reason.
their value for marketing the church – if moderate schism increases interest in the subject, it has done its job. Mr. Slope and Mrs. Proudie, on the other hand, favor *immoderate* schism; their particular brand of low-church belief has the potential to seriously alienate the people of Barsetshire. If a little doctrinal controversy can energize the Church of England, too much can tear apart the institution that Trollope celebrates.

Given this general suspicion of religious content and celebration of institutional forms, Arabin’s commitment to high-church doctrine and practice might seem to be a problem. But unlike Mr. Slope, Arabin does not let his beliefs calcify into dogma. And Arabin doesn’t let his doctrine interfere with the church’s predictable routines. His earlier attraction to the Catholic Church dissipates before the novel begins, despite his sympathy for Cardinal Newman, and he instead becomes a dedicated servant of the Church of England, a man who “put his shoulder to the wheel as a clergyman of the Church for which he had been educated” (I.190). His opinions do not change, as he remains “a man always ready at a moment’s notice to take up the cudgels in opposition to anything that savoured of an evangelical bearing” (I.191). But he never lets his opinions get in the way of his job. Perhaps best of all, Arabin shows a capacity to doubt and question that the Slopes of the world never display. He tells Eleanor Bold that “on important subjects I acquire no fixed opinion. I think, and think, and go on thinking; and yet my thoughts are running ever in different directions” (II.232). And although he refers to this indecision as “the bane of my life” (II.232), it is in fact his great virtue. Arabin embodies this sort of “moderate schism” that Trollope favors; he continually generates thoughts and ideas without ever coming to an alienating or threatening conclusion. As Anderson argues, he “represents the perfect dovetailing of ethos and argument in doctrinal matters,” a man who embodies the practice
Trollope admires Arabin’s ability to accommodate “moderate schism” without undermining the institution as a whole. Trollope aspires to do for fiction what Arabin does for the Church of England – that is, openly address the challenges and problems that face literature while defending the basic structure of the novel. This pattern of generating interest in conventions without challenging foundations, in other words, governs the form of *Barchester Towers* as well as its subject matter. It explains the sort of intrusive narrative strategies that Henry James would refer to as “suicidal” (116) and today seem almost postmodern a hundred years in advance. These moments of intrusion do not undermine Trollope’s fictional project, but instead call attention to the challenges and problems novelists address in their careers. An early concern, for instance, is the problem of mimesis. Trollope frequently tells the reader of his problems with representing characters. He pauses before introducing Arabin, for instance, by wishing for some literary equivalent of photography in which the “characters of men can be reduced to writing and put into grammatical language with an unerring precision of truthful description” (I.186). In the absence of this mechanical process, novelists are forced to do the job themselves, and their “words forsake, elude, disappoint” (I.186). Trollope concedes that photographs have their limitations, and that novelists must simply take on the challenge, since “there is no way of writing well and also of writing easily” (I.186). He then offers a motto for “every labourer” (I.186) regardless of profession – Virgil’s “*Labor omnia vincit improbus*” (I.
and proceeds to describe and introduce Arabin. This episode can be taken as characteristic of Trollope’s digressions in *Barchester Towers*: he acknowledges a difficulty or problem with his literary project candidly, and then proceeds to work through the difficulty with the convention anyway. He calls attention to the problems that accompany literary conventions, but then works to meet those conventions as best as he can. Since Trollope remains confident that literary conventions serve a valid purpose, his exploration of their problems does not lead him to reject them. These moments, as playfully metafictional as any postmodern novel, are not challenges to the realist project but challenges addressed by a professional working in the field.

Nowhere can Trollope’s pattern of acknowledging the problems with the conventions he follows be seen more clearly than in his approach to plot. Trollope cheerfully announces that “our doctrine is, that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other” (I.144). The term “doctrine” is intriguing here; Trollope, reluctant to pronounce on Christian doctrine in the novel itself, has no qualms about declaring his doctrinal principles when it comes to his own profession. And this doctrine of full disclosure between novelist and reader fits well with his claims about fiction in the *Autobiography*. Trollope, aiming for this “full confidence” between reader and narrator, has no interest in using plot to generate suspense. If the purpose of suspense, as Caroline Levine argues, is to “teach us to take pleasure in the activity of stopping to doubt our most entrenched beliefs” (10), it’s no surprise that Trollope rejects suspenseful plotting as much as any novelist can. He has no desire to encourage readers to doubt entrenched beliefs. Moderate doubt can be seamlessly incorporated into the church and the novel, providing a site for disputes to be clarified and resolved. And more severe doubt, the sort that would threaten even the most flexible institution, is the sort of doubt that Trollope is happy
to rule out of bounds. Hence the sort of surprises narrative can hold – as a disapproving reference to “Mrs. Ratcliffe’s [sic] solemn curtain” (I.143) makes clear – serve no function in Trollope’s fiction. This frees Trollope to make bold declarations like “let the gentle-hearted reader be under no apprehension whatsoever. It is not destined that Eleanor shall marry Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope” (I.143), deflating any suspense about potential suitors early in the novel. Any skepticism or doubting that cannot be contained by the forms of the church or the novel, such as those opened up by suspenseful plotting, are the sorts of skepticism and plotting Trollope wants his readers to do without.

Not only is Trollope willing to use conventional and predictable plots, he is happy to comment on the plot expectations that readers bring to the novel. In an episode where Eleanor Bold and Arabin quarrel, Trollope breaks the illusion and concedes that the problem could easily have been resolved right then. If Eleanor had openly started to cry, he explains, Arabin would have “declared his love” (II.32), and that would have been the end of it. His justification for what happens instead is disarmingly and humorously blunt: “But then where would have been my novel?” (II.32). Some sort of moderate schism – a plot development to separate the lovers for two hundred pages or so – is necessary to keep the story running. And Trollope offers no other justification than this. His commitment to realism cannot stop the novel with this simple and entirely plausible resolution; the story needs to keep running, and therefore the plot needs to include a contrivance in order to forestall Eleanor and Arabin’s inevitable union. Trollope is quite right, of course; the marriage plot can’t resolve itself too early. But if Trollope is like most novelists in crafting his plot to fit the space he has allotted for it, he is much more unusual in openly commenting on this process while he does it. It seems that “full confidence” between
reader and author must also include frank acknowledgements of the requirements that let the novel work at all. And Trollope proves happy to use the marriage plot he has just outlined for us, as he has no desire to undermine the conventions he discusses. His metafictional digressions simply outline the challenges the novelist faces on the job.

Just as Trollope is eager to tell us about the internal requirements that govern his narrative, he is also happy to talk about the external conditions *Barchester Towers* must fulfill. He discusses, for instance, the challenges of fitting his work to the requirements imposed by the three-volume novel. As he begins to wrap up the narrative, he observes that “a difficulty begins to make itself manifest in the necessity of disposing of all our friends in the small remainder of this one volume” (II.178). And if this attention to the formal restraint on his fiction isn’t jarring enough, he immediately follows it with a mock lamentation that directly references his publisher: “Oh, that Mr. Longman would allow me a fourth! It should transcend the other three as the seventh heaven transcends all the lower stages of celestial bliss” (II.178). Even more disconcerting, Trollope admits that he is challenged by the very task of completing the novel. He faces a difficult problem: to “apportion out and dovetail his incidents, dialogues, characters, and descriptive morsels, so as to fit them all exactly into 439 pages” (II.252). He then confesses that “I am at this moment in want of a dozen pages, and that I am sick with cudgelling my brains to find them” (II.252). These endearingly frank disclosures – surely ranking with his cheerful confession of his desire to excel in quantity as moments that particularly damaged his critical reputation – are remarkably honest about the arbitrary restrictions and problems with the three-volume novel. Their humor comes from briefly dispelling the illusion his narration has created, revealing both his investment in the fictional game he plays and the challenges that this game
poses. They call attention to the potential failure of Trollope’s work, even as he manages to competently do exactly what he tells us is so difficult: apportion out incident, plot, character, and digression to fit a restrictive, institutionally-mandated format.

In fact, the problems besetting Trollope’s own profession of fiction parallel the problems he observes in the Church of England. The specific content of each set of problems, of course, is quite different, as one would expect to find in two largely differentiated spheres. But in both cases, the problems lie in the difficulty of meeting the institution’s structural needs. The Church of England has to contend with theological conflict, dogmatic and schismatic clergymen, rivalry between ambitious professionals, the difficulty of establishing convincing interpretations of doctrine and belief, and so on. The novel, meanwhile, has an imposing and difficult format that requires plots to be expanded, cut, shrunk, or otherwise distorted; conventional expectations from readers who demand “sweetmeats and sugar-plums” (II.266) at the novel’s conclusion; and the task of skillfully balancing character, plot, and observation. But for both the church and the novel, Trollope argues that the benefit of having each institution – namely, the ethical function it serves – justifies all the difficulty it puts its professionals through. And his concern for maintaining that ethical function makes him extremely conservative about changing those institutional forms. Trollope is happy to tolerate enormous difference within the Church of England – his appreciation for “moderate schism” is quite extensive – as long as the Church continues to thrive. Likewise, in his own work, Trollope is happy to complain about the difficulties he faces in plotting or filling pages, but he has no desire or ambition to tamper with or undermine the form he has inherited. Trollope is no naïve idealist – he acknowledges the flaws and problems with both forms – but in both cases, he feels that the virtues of each
institution outweigh its flaws. As a professional committed to the success of his work, Trollope creates novels that happily flaunt their artifice, but in order to celebrate it, not to undermine it. He expects the same attitude of tolerance and professionalism in his clergymen, even as he respects their autonomy enough not to focus on its particular doctrinal content. The self-referential style, then, derives from *Barchester Towers*’ efforts to work through common difficulties in the fictional career. Meanwhile, the novel’s deliberately vague statements on religion are the product of a desire to take religion seriously as a source of ethical knowledge and a profession with rigorous standards of its own.

* 

If *Barchester Towers* is a novel about the difficulty of achieving this solution, *Framley Parsonage* is what results when the solution has been found and can be put into practice. Or, to use a metaphor that matches Trollope’s keen interest in professionalism, if *Barchester Towers* is the novel where Trollope designs the blueprint for his fiction, *Framley Parsonage* is the product of Trollope’s smoothly-functioning assembly line. The novel’s plot, as in *Barchester Towers*, is both familiar and predictable. One thread deals with a marriage plot, where Lord Lufton must overcome his mother’s objections and gain her approval to marry Lucy Robarts. The other presents Lucy’s brother Mark, who makes an unwise decision to back a loan for the unreliable and untrustworthy Mr. Sowerby. Of course, the marriage plot ends happily in marriage, and Mark Robarts repents after having learnt that he cannot “touch pitch” (494) without suffering consequences. Although Mrs. Proudie makes a brief appearance, and Mr. Slope is referenced, no theological controversy appears to agitate the plot; indeed, as James Kincaid rightly observes, “the threats to established power amount to so little, and the confirmation of that power seems so
certain. Consequently, there is very little need for any action” (121). As Bradford Booth puts it, the novel has the predictability of ballet, where “the interest ... is not that of surprise but of expectation” (49). Trollope, in this novel, seems confident in the formula he has constructed: treat religion seriously but avoid theological discussion, use stock plots to construct several ethical dilemmas that have to be resolved happily, acknowledge any difficulties encountered in the course of writing the novel in order to clarify the problems of the career, and otherwise let the machinery do its work. Both the Church of England Trollope depicts and the novel itself proceed in the confidence that they can handle any obstacles that come their way.

For despite the easy confidence that characterizes the novel, Framley Parsonage does present the reader with some ethical problems. Unlike in Barchester Towers, this novel completely discards religious or theological controversy. In fact, readers disappointed with Barchester Towers’ scanty treatment of religious content will be even more annoyed here, as theology plays no role in Framley Parsonage. Instead, Trollope has moved the conflict fully into the social lives of clergymen, a realm where religious doctrine simply has no bearing on the action. Mark Robarts’s flaw does not come from any evangelical bent (as it does in both Mr. Slope and Mrs. Proudie) but rather his poor judgment in affiliating with a dubious social circle. His ambition to circulate with a more powerful group of friends leads to his flawed judgment. Hence his error is a matter of propriety; his conscience, we are told, tells him that “it would be well for him, as one of Christ’s soldiers, to look out for companions of a different stamp” (56). The ultimate outcome is nothing more serious than humiliation – bailiffs come and seize his property when he is unable to repay the debt – and the problem is resolved through the generosity of Lady Lufton, who is herself in the midst of reforming and learning to accept her
son’s choice of brides. The problem that generates the plot, in other words, is no longer a problem that threatens the institution of the Church of England at all. It has been relocated to the individual and personal realm; Trollope is examining the failings of one man and not a threat that damages the church in its entirety.

Only once does Mark Robarts’s poor judgment seem to create a problem for the entire Church of England. Near the end of the novel, Robarts is made the subject of a harsh attack published by the muckracking journalist Tom Towers. Towers, eager to sensationalize the problem, sees Robarts’ behavior as an indicator of broader corruption. He declares that “it is with difficulty enough ... that the Church of England maintains at the present moment that ascendancy among the religious sects of this country which it so loudly claims” (546). The Church of England, for Towers, is one religious option among many, and one that is not noted for any sort of humility about its place. He locates that ascendancy in “an old-fashioned and time-honoured affection” rather than in “intrinsic merits” (546). And Towers denounces Robarts not just for his financial scandal but for possessing a luxurious position in the church at a young age; he is seen as the result of elevating “unfit men to high positions” (547). As it turns out, though, the controversy quickly dies down. The Robarts family is not treated like pariahs – “neighbouring rectors did not look glum, nor did the rector’s wives refuse to call” (548), Trollope reassures us. In fact, the only person convinced by the article to dislike the Robarts family is Mrs. Proudie, and that of course reveals much more about her than Mark. The location of this failed bombshell – at the very end of the novel, as the plots are being neatly wrapped up – indicates how truly insignificant it is. Only ridiculous figures like Tom Towers think that Mark
Robarts’ behavior has any bearing on the church itself at all (and Towers was himself the recipient of Trollope’s disdain in *The Warden*).

Trollope thus convincingly moves the action of the plot from an institutional conflict to one man’s personal failings. Interestingly, he does so while conceding that Mark Robarts, though not a bad man, is no saint either. As in *Barchester Towers* and *Clergymen of the Church of England*, *Framley Parsonage* gently rebukes us for being naïve enough to think that clergymen are not men like any other. We are reminded very early on that “clergymen are subject to the same passions as other men; and, as far as I can see, give way to them, in one line or in another, almost as frequently” (66). In fact, Trollope cheerfully admits that Mark’s position in the church is largely due to Lady Lufton’s intervention – his success so early in life is due to “chance and conduct” (33) in largely equal measure. But since the novel makes it clear that clergymen are prone to the same failings as other professionals, Mark’s failings only reflect poorly on him, not the entire Church of England. Trollope’s candor reinforces his confidence in the institution. It is not possible for him to defend the behavior of every clergyman in the church – but it is not necessary to do so either. The organization, in his view, remains healthy regardless of any personal failings, and its health makes him able to be honest about the flaws and misguided behavior of individuals.

Trollope’s confidence in the social order that governs Victorian England enables his defense of realist characterization. Mark Robarts is, of course, the best example of this realism; he has “many aptitudes for good” and yet lacks “the strengthened courage of a man to act up to them” (493). But because the Church of England is in no serious danger, Trollope can happily acknowledge that its clergymen are as prone to error as anyone else. Lord Lufton, as Mark’s
friend, is treated similarly. Trollope, sensitive to the accusation that Lord Lufton is an unworthy suitor for Lucy Robarts, dismisses the idea that “heroes in books should be so much better than heroes got up for the world’s common wear and tear” (261). Instead, he substitutes a balanced assessment of his characters, declaring that “a man may be very imperfect and yet worth a great deal” (369). Both of these statements, of course, apply equally well to Mark Robarts, as they are phrased as generalizations. And this generous realism derives from the stability Trollope sees in the world he portrays; the health of its institutions means that Trollope can be honest about the limits of the individuals who inhabit them. Framley Parsonage presents a world, as James Kincaid notes, where “the values have been won and are in little need of protection” (93). With no Mr. Slope posing a real threat, Trollope can afford to be generous to his characters even as he unsparingly describes their flaws. His realist characterization derives from his confidence in the institutions that hold this world together.

Trollope only comments on the structure of the Church of England briefly, returning to a theme that he would later touch on in his Clergymen of the Church of England: his desire to reform the antiquated distribution of financial rewards in the church. This digression is motivated by the introduction of Mr. Crawley, who works diligently for very little money (and whose poverty will become a key plot point in The Last Chronicle of Barset). Trollope introduces, with a mock-scandalized tone, the idea of a church in which clergymen are paid “not according to the temporalities of any living which they may have acquired either by merit or favour, but in accordance with the work to be done” (186). Trollope, ever interested in rationalization, acknowledges that “our” conservative sentiment makes the idea “disagreeable” (186), but he claims that if we object to reform “we do so by the force of our
prejudices, and not by that of our judgment” (186). And once again, he returns to his argument for treating the church like any other profession, declaring that “in other trades, professions, and lines of life, men are paid according to their work. Let it be so in the Church” (187). But this need for reform does not threaten the Church; Trollope confidently claims that this reform will “sooner or later be the edict of a utilitarian, reforming, matter-of-fact House of Parliament” (187). And he remains wary of overdoing the commentary on the church, claiming that he has “a scheme of [his] own on the subject, which [he] will not introduce here, seeing that neither men nor women would read it” (187). If rationalization remains an interest of Trollope’s, his confidence in the church’s ultimate stability keeps his attention to the subject at a minimum. He devotes a mere two pages to the subject, predicts victory for the forces of rationalization, and enters on this digression simply in order to introduce Mr. Crawley to the reader. With the Church of England operating smoothly, Trollope has no need to belabor the point. He can return to the social observation at the heart of his fictional project.

Perhaps the best indicator of Trollope’s newfound confidence in his project comes in a brief discussion of sermons and fiction. Once again, he differentiates between his work as a novelist and the didactic obligations of the church. His aim, he tells us, is to portray clergymen “as they bear on our social life” (492), not to investigate “the mode and working of their professional careers” (492-3). (Note again the word “professional,” indicating that Trollope’s hesitation is due to his respect for the rationalized career.) Doing so, he claims, would have forced him to discuss subjects “on which it has not been my intention to pronounce an opinion” (493). And that would lead to two undesirable mixing of genres: “I should either have laden my fiction with sermons or I should have degraded my sermons into fiction” (493). This
distinction, it should be noted, is more emphatic than the one Trollope gives us in the *Autobiography*, where fiction becomes a sort of sermon that simply differs from those spoken in pulpits. There seems to be a much firmer distinction made between the two genres – Trollope’s portrayal of “social life” has been clearly differentiated from the overt didacticism of sermons. The Church of England, he implies, is perfectly capable of handling religion on its own. *Framley Parsonage* is thus free to pursue the portrayal of the social realm that it sees as the essence of fiction.

And just as *Framley Parsonage* appears serenely confident in the Church of England’s ability to fit its differentiated niche, Trollope seems much less interested in using humorous asides to draw our attention to the techniques that make fiction work. Occasionally, he provides some mock anxiety over how to construct a novel. He pretends to be uneasy with the process of description; in the first chapter, he refers to this task as the “novelist’s great difficulty” (36). Later, introducing Lucy Robarts, he declares that “if one might only go on without these descriptions, how pleasant it would all be!” (138). But compared to the lengthier digressions of *Barchester Towers*, these asides seem more like pro forma gestures than comic asides that hint at a genuine difficulty. For one, they are substantially shorter – while *Barchester Towers* digresses for paragraphs at a time to wish for a mechanical method of describing character, for instance, *Framley Parsonage* limits these digressions to a mere sentence before a description. And Trollope shows no anxiety in this novel over problems that plagued him in *Barchester Towers*. He never laments the difficulty of tailoring plot to a given number of pages, even though *Framley Parsonage*, as a serialized novel, arguably has a more difficult task than its predecessor – it must fit, not three volumes, but a number of different magazine issues with strict limitations.
on space. But the only reference to the formal constraints that manage the novel is a reminder at the beginning of one installment of what happened “at the end of the last chapter” (267), and this reminder is unobtrusive. The formal difficulties of the novel – a major subject for Trollope’s digressions in *Barchester Towers* – have here been reduced to two brief references to the difficulty of describing a character. Trollope’s narrator has become far more comfortable with the requirements of his own institution, and accommodates his work so easily that the digressive, metafictional moments of the previous novel have been almost entirely left behind.

This newfound confidence becomes a pattern throughout *Framley Parsonage*. The conclusion of the novel, for instance, delivers a comic ending without the anguish over properly wrapping up the plot that appears in *Barchester Towers*. Where the earlier novel pointed out the difficulty of writing a compelling ending that delivered the cheerful resolution readers crave, Trollope does not need to mention that obligation this time. The final chapter announces its comfort with the comic resolution in its title: “How they were all Married, had Two Children, and lived Happy ever after” (553). Trollope’s readers are no longer those who demand a resolution that will inevitably disappoint; the narrator openly addresses them as “dear, affectionate, sympathetic readers” (553). And while he concedes that it is “now necessary” (553) to write a brief synopsis of how all the marriage plots conclude, he shows no concern about the difficulty of doing so. Once again, Trollope is very self-conscious about the requirements that impose themselves upon comic fiction, but he has absolutely no problem with meeting these requirements. The narrative voice no longer expresses any doubt about the purpose of his work or his ability to achieve it; it simply lets the reader know what it plans on doing, without any apprehension about the task ahead. Just as *Framley Parsonage* remains confident in the religious
institutions it portrays, it remains confident in the requirements and conventions of the novel form.

Trollope’s digressive, conversational style also remains recognizable in *Framley Parsonage*. But rather than offering up concerns about his work as a novelist, the style works to help the narrative run smoothly. Just as in *Barchester Towers*, where Trollope aims to have the novelist and reader go hand in hand through the novel, he here aims to “tell the truth openly and at once” (152). He intervenes, as in the previous novel, to correct the reader’s mistaken opinions of the world; he announces, for instance, that he “cannot hold with those who wish to put down the insignificant chatter of the world” (144). Otherwise, his intrusive moments tend to be brief reminders of plot, in order to ensure that the reader understands where the narrative is going. Hence the novel provides brief remarks at the beginning of chapters to remind us of earlier developments: “I trust my readers will all remember ...” (312), “It has been mentioned cursorily ...” (362), and so forth. These digressions and intrusions, then, work to clarify the reader’s misconceptions, not to remind us of the challenges the novelist faces. Those challenges have been met, and any sense of doubt over his fiction’s purpose, or his ability to achieve it, has long since disappeared. It makes sense, then, that a novel focusing on a much weaker threat to the Church of England would be far more confident in its own fictional operation; if *Barchester Towers* shows the novel and church struggling and eventually triumphing over the problems it faces, *Framley Parsonage* shows what happens when both forms have achieved victory. It is a novel brimming with confidence over the merits – and lasting success – of the church it describes and the conventions it uses.

*
It seems clear, then, that Goodlad, Dever, and Dames are right to argue that Trollope’s fiction is more formally sophisticated than earlier critics have thought. This innovation may be harder to see, since Trollope never disavows old forms or develops new ones, but a real ingenuity lies behind his novels’ familiar tropes and topoi. Instead of casting off realist clichés, he justifies the techniques he uses, carefully thinking through the logic of plots and characterization. His use of conventional plots and his modest, digressive style are products of his conviction that the novel has a unique purpose – one ethical and pleasurable all at once. This belief in literature’s distinctive goals, and his desire to consistently achieve them, leads him to develop reliable, predictable procedures that are no less effective for their familiarity. Just as he respects the differentiation of the literary sphere, he also acknowledges that religion has become a profession as well – his studied avoidance of theological controversy or doctrine, for instance, is the result of a rigorous interest in respecting the autonomy of the Church of England. When form and content combine, his novels celebrate the ethical potential of fiction and religion alike, clarifying the techniques and operations that make realist fiction possible. With a cast of characters drawn from everyday life, familiar plots to test and examine them, and a metafictional narrative commentary, Trollope constructs a fictional machine that, he claims, teaches the reader about ethics and consequences.

The subtlety of Trollope’s thoughts on the novel-writing career, and the complex formal and thematic responses developed in his fiction, makes the ambition of his work clear. But this raises a final question: even if his fiction is a sophisticated exploration of differentiation, it has often been castigated as a politically dubious. (Or, as Turner notes, it has been embraced by the wrong crowd, as Trollope has become “an author embraced by a conservative
establishment” (2).) At this point I turn to the most prominent conversation surrounding Trollope’s fiction: his reputation as “the novelist par excellence of Victorian liberalism” (Goodlad 851). For many critics of modernity, Trollope’s embrace of the rationalized, differentiated career is nothing less than catastrophic. Ever since Max Weber claimed that those of us born into modernity live in an “iron cage” (181), where human freedom is restricted by the machinery of bureaucratic institutions, differentiation theory has argued about whether modernity and rationalization should be celebrated or lamented (Habermas’s work is in large part an attempt to rescue modernity from its own worst tendencies). In literary studies, this debate has taken the form of a Foucault-inspired attack on the disciplinary power lurking behind liberal institutions. The argument – I will call it the disciplinary argument as a convenient shorthand – goes something like this: the Victorian novel both represents in its characters and creates in its readers a view of the self often called the “liberal subject” – an individual who imagines him- or herself free to choose, think, and act in the world. But this liberal subject is a sham, a product of disciplinary powers that create, constrain, and repress it. The novel then becomes one of the most powerful means of making this liberal subject enjoy its imprisonment.

The disciplinary argument appears across a generation of scholarship, from D. A. Miller’s The Novel and the Police to Nancy Armstrong’s How Novels Think. Miller claims that the novel’s major task is to “confirm the novel-reader in his identity as ‘liberal subject’,” a being who “seems to recognize himself most fully only when he forgets or disavows his functional implication in a system of carceral restraints or disciplinary injunctions” (Miller x). Armstrong goes further, arguing that “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same” (3). The novel produces a subject who, far from being free,
must “be disciplined, that is, observed, contained, sublimated, and redirected toward a socially acceptable goal” (Armstrong 8). In both cases, the novel is one of many institutions that exercise a repressive disciplinary power, controlling the duped liberal subject who believes him/herself to be free. The supposed “formlessness” of Trollope’s novels masks their connection to disciplinary forms that are quite powerful indeed.

There are several legitimate insights in this argument. But the disciplinary argument as it stands needs to be clarified; as currently written, it bundles two distinct claims together. The first is a claim that the liberal subject is, to a degree, fictitious, because selves are always more socially constructed – by different institutions, historical context, and so forth – than liberal models of humanity can account for. The second claim is that these institutions and context offer an unappealing set of options for the self to “freely” choose. The disciplinary argument, in Charles Taylor’s words, combines “ontological issues and advocacy issues” (181). These two claims are not necessarily linked. And, more dangerously, some of the (quite reasonable) disapproval that comes with the second claim can slip over to the first, which is a statement about what a human subject is and not what it should be. This first claim is simply an argument that, as Taylor puts it, the role a self can take in society depends on “the set of practices and institutions which shape the life of my society” (“Irreducibly Social Goods” 135). If we accept this claim, and thus decide that this version of the liberal subject is not as independent from social, historical, or institutional forces as it claims to be, this changes the topic to the benefits and problems with particular forms of power and the particular selves those forms shape. In Foucault’s terms, we need to examine the power that shapes selves, the “productive network
which runs through the whole social body” (61). In other words, even if institutions do shape the self, it does not necessarily follow that we should object to those institutions.

The first claim – that the liberal subject is in fact the product of a number of social forces and contexts not under his or her control – is quite true. But it is also clear that neither Trollope, nor liberal political theorists more generally, would find this claim objectionable. His keen interest in institutions makes it clear that, although Trollope self-identified as a liberal, he fully understands that historical context and social institutions help make us who we are. In fact, he celebrates this process, enthusiastically embracing the Church of England and the novel as powerful forces for shaping his world. The recurring and extensive concern with the forms of his novel and the institution of the Church of England derive from this awareness that selves are not formed in a vacuum. Trollope’s liberalism is much closer to the self-aware variety of contemporary political theorists than the naive (one might even say straw-man) liberal who believes in completely autonomous selves. Consider, for instance, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s defense of liberalism in *The Ethics of Identity*, which offers a subtle defense of the idea of the individual subject. He defends the idea of autonomy as “an ideal of self-authorship” (156). But, he argues, “the metaphor should remind us that we write in a language we did not ourselves make. If we are authors of ourselves, it is state and society that provide us with the tools and the contexts of our authorship; we may shape our selves, but others shape our shaping” (156).

Hence, in his argument, there is nothing incompatible between liberalism’s interest in producing a relatively tolerant society and largely autonomous subjects and a belief that the self is profoundly shaped by the social forms that surround it. In fact, the two go hand in hand; if state and society supply the possibilities for our shaping, as Appiah argues, then liberalism becomes
an argument for a relatively high degree of autonomy for individuals within the forces that shape it. This sort of liberal subject is one much like Trollope’s character under glass – relatively free to act and move within the structures that hold it.

Of course, this interest in celebrating the Church of England and the realist novel leads to the disciplinary argument’s second claim, and similarly pessimistic assessments of modernity from Weber to Adorno. If you find these institutions and their disciplinary powers to be threatening, as many critics do, Trollope’s novels are all the more troubling for their success. For Miller, the value in *Barchester Towers* lies in how it reveals the menace of policing, shaping force behind the supposedly benign forces of “liberalism.” (Curiously, Miller does not mention *Framley Parsonage*, in which these forces have become so effective that no serious threat to the Church of England can even appear in the novel.) In this reading, something almost totalitarian lurks behind the tolerant surface of the church; Trollope can accommodate “moderate schism” in *Barchester Towers* and deal frankly with the errors of clergymen in *Framley Parsonage* because there’s no way outside the institution itself. And the novel, in Miller’s account, has the same sort of policing power; the narrator’s tolerant tone and the smoothly working plot hide a ruthless desire to control and shape the reader’s responses to the world it portrays. What Trollope does so well, in other words, is build a well-run machine that celebrates repressive power. The novels answer this objection by claiming that the Church of England and the novel are more capacious and flexible than their critics would allow. Trollope’s work asserts that, as Sharon Marcus describes the institution of marriage, social forms can possess the “ability to change without undergoing the kind of radical ruptures that yield completely new forms” (5). This model of the institution – holding firm on certain essentials while proving radically flexible in many other
respects – is how Trollope sees the Church of England and the realist novel. The question is simply whether Trollope works to defend a bad set of institutions.

Since Trollope defines himself politically as an “advanced conservative Liberal” (Autobiography 294), he praises the role these institutions play as generally beneficial, and he shies away from “any sudden disruption of society” (293) that would suddenly change or radically alter those institutions. It is certainly fair, of course, to disagree with him here; few of us would turn the clock back one hundred and fifty years. But Trollope cannot be easily dismissed as a naive dupe. Trollope, instead, has chosen to embrace the logic of differentiation and the possibilities it brings. He is not interested in consolidating power in repressive institutions for the sake of social control; instead, Trollope hopes to secure the rationalized systems of novel and church so that they may pursue a specialized set of problems. He recognizes and celebrates those institutions, embracing both literature and the church as differentiated spheres with their own unique role to play. His recurring concern with the conventional forms of the novel and the Church of England derive from his interest in seeing their continued existence, because he remains confident in their capacity for ethical instruction. Here Trollope can be linked to a number of theorists of modernity in the tradition of the Enlightenment, who hoped that rationalization would help in improving and “shaping the conditions of daily life” (Habermas 2.326). For Trollope, conservative liberalism implies not a willful blindness to institutional power, but a celebration of its capacity to instruct the people whose lives are shaped by it. He remains confident that embracing the potential of differentiation, allowing fiction and religion to develop around distinct but related sets of problems, will allow them to play a valuable ethical role in the world.
Trollope’s “conservative liberalism,” then, is not convinced that institutions that shape our lives are inherently unacceptable. And like liberal theorists at their most aware, he is not naive about power; he understands, as John Rawls puts it, that “the social system shapes the wants and aspirations that its citizens come to have” and that “the choice of these institutions involves some view of human good and of the design of institutions to realize it” (229). The task for critics with a skeptical view of the institutions we inhabit, then, is to manage and arrange them in better ways that “will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible” (Foucault 298). And it is here that Trollope’s fiction remains valuable even for those of us who would change or reject the society he defends. For his novels, in form and content alike, anatomize the mechanisms through which fiction and the Church of England operate, as he examines their effects on the characters they contain. Indeed, his fiction works toward a Habermasian end, attempting to clarify the logic of the literary sphere so that it is not part of “an elitist splitting-off of expert cultures from contexts of communicative action in daily life” (II. 330). Whether or not we accept Trollope’s sunny view of Victorian literature and the Church of England, his efforts to clearly present their conventions and forms mark his fiction as part of Enlightenment liberalism at its most self-aware.
Organic Secularism, Organic Form: George Eliot’s Growing Unbelief

“We must be patient with the inevitable makeshift of our human thinking, whether in its sum total or in the separate minds that have made the sum.”

Daniel Deronda (438)

As we move from Anthony Trollope to George Eliot, our focus shifts from secularization as a process – the impact of social differentiation on religion and literature – to secularism as a set of beliefs or attitudes toward religion. Consequently, religion faces a bigger threat; the question changes from “What role does religion have in the world?” to “Does religion have any valid knowledge or social role at all?” Not surprisingly, discussions of secularism rapidly become contentious, with sharp disagreement over religion’s future. And the critics of secularism are not just believers who resist a process that seems to minimize their power. In recent years some of the staunchest critics of secularism are postcolonial scholars who challenge secularism’s viability and origins. T. N. Madan has charged that secularism in South Asia “as a generally shared credo of life is impossible, as a basis for state action impracticable, and as a blueprint for the foreseeable future impotent” (298). Because of its origins in “the dialectic of modern science and Protestantism” (308), he claims, secularism does not translate well to non-Protestant cultures. Ashis Nandy, a self-avowed “anti-secularist” (326), goes further. He argues that “the ideology and politics of secularism have more or less exhausted their possibilities” (326), and he claims that any hope for tolerance between rival religions in India must come from the “internal principles of tolerance” (336) that have developed within those religions. Importing Western ideas of secularism under the guise of universally applicable principles, according to these critics, is a form of intellectual imperialism. Ironically, secularism
turns out to be a fundamentally Christian concept, dependent upon “the normative assumptions and power of Western Christianity” (Mahmood 299).

This challenge to secularism originates in a very familiar accusation: that European modernity and its disruptive power can harm a society’s integrity. In this argument we can hear echoes of Edmund Burke and his famous critique of the French Revolution, particularly a concern that Enlightenment rationality destroys local, organic cultures. Not surprisingly, since Burke was “unmatched by any British statesmen or political thinker of the eighteenth or nineteenth century” (Mehta 155) in his skepticism toward imperialism, postcolonial critiques of secularism often borrow his language and arguments. Burke argues in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that radical changes overlook circumstances that “give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour, and discriminating effect” (8); likewise, Nandy accuses secularism of being indifferent to the “configurative principles” of individual cultures – even calling secularism “definitionally ethnophobic and frequently ethnocidal” (324). But Burke and postcolonial critics do not simply accuse their rivals of a myopic inattention to detail; they also accuse modernizers and imperialists of ignoring society’s organic nature. Burke famously likens society to a “permanent body composed of transitory parts” and “a relation in blood” (34), and Nandy argues that radical fundamentalism appeals to those “uprooted and decultured by the processes of engineered social change” (323). For these writers, European modernity – and by extension, secularism – violently assaults the living bodies of the societies it encounters. Hence Nandy denounces the “violence flowing from objectification, scientization, and bureaucratic rationality” (341), just as Burke, using terms we would expect from postcolonial criticism, attacked the “sophists, oeconomists, and calculators” (76) who form a “new conquering empire
of light and reason” (77). In both accounts, the cold, unfeeling machinery of modernity destroys the organic life of societies. And although post-secularists and postcolonial critics shy away from the word “organic,” the rhetorical overlap is unmistakeable; compare this language, for instance, to Coleridge’s famous comparison of mechanical form, in which “we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material,” to organic form, which is “innate” and “shapes as it develops itself from within” (495).11

Over two hundred years later, then, the debate about secularism still revolves around a familiar set of oppositions: the local, organic, religious, and conservative against the cosmopolitan, secular, rational, and progressive. And it is in the interest of complicating these oppositions that I would like to bring George Eliot into the conversation: one of the most famous Victorians to reject Christianity, the translator of Feuerbach and Strauss, she is also the novelist who wrote sympathetically about England’s rural clergymen and ended her fictional career with an equally sympathetic treatment of Zionism and Judaism. As in Trollope’s Barchester series, George Eliot’s novels offer a qualified endorsement of secularization, accepting its benefits and working to ameliorate its problems. But while Trollope focuses on secularization’s institutional changes, exploring literature and religion’s response to differentiation, Eliot directs her attention to secularism’s impact on belief itself. She approaches secularization by arguing that its process and final destination are distinct problems. Hence while Eliot sympathizes with the claim that society must develop slowly, as an organic unit, she rejects the idea that an organic development must largely be held intact. Instead, she views the slow growth of society as a necessary part of

11 Organic form has acquired such a poor reputation in literary studies recently that I might be suspected of trying to refute post-secularism on the cheap by linking it to Romanticism. As my argument will make clear, this is not the case. If anything, the powerful arguments and legitimate concerns of postcolonial and post-secular critics should make us revisit this hasty dismissal of organic form.
historical processes, but hopes to eventually discard the errors that, as part of that very organic society, grow within it. Eliot hopes to see conservative organic growth, in other words, lead to radical social transformations, making her an instructive figure for those who wish to take secularism and anti-secularism seriously. She is what we might call an “organic secularist,” one who respects the need for slow social development even while hoping for a day when religion fades into agnostic humanism. In order to explore this organic secularism, her work develops an equally innovative conception of organic form, translating her ideas into the realm of narrative voice and plot structure.

*  

As we might expect, Eliot’s views on society never drift far from her artistic theory. “The Natural History of German Life” insists that art and society alike should be understood as organisms, and that anyone who studies either must ground their work in careful observation. Art, for instance, can extend “our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (110) only if it pursues an honest and accurate representation of reality. Neither art nor social theory, Eliot insists, can succeed without careful attention to mundane, quotidian detail. Like Burke, Eliot argues that only local circumstances can explain social wholes – or the ideals and concepts that exist within them. And for Eliot, there are two distinct options for understanding these social wholes. One option is to envision society as “an organism the conditions of which are bound up with the historical characteristics” (122) of the subjects who inhabit it. The alternative, she claims, is a “bureaucratic plan of government” that is “bent on improvement by its patent machinery of state-appointed functionaries and off-hand regulations in accordance with modern enlightenment” (122). Liberalism and Enlightenment philosophy, she
argues, emphasize the mechanical and rational over the organic and historical. And Eliot, like Burke, finds fault with this new “mechanical” system of government. In a sentence that could easily have been written by Burke himself, she argues that “a system which disregards the traditions and hereditary attachments of the peasant, and appeals only to a logical understanding which is not yet developed in him, is simply disintegrating and ruinous to the peasant character” (122). Any system that departs from this organic understanding of society is a “false system” (122), one that ignores the circumstances that shape abstract principles.

Consequently, artists who falsify their presentation of everyday life endanger art’s power to understand the world. She faults the idyllic representations of English peasants for poor observation, claiming that they reject accurate depictions in favor of clichés: the peasant “cracking a joke and showing a row of sound teeth,” the “usually buxom” peasant mothers, the “necessarily rosy and merry” (108) children. Most famously, Eliot argues that Dickens’ novels, despite their extraordinary skill at “rendering the external traits of our town population” (111), suffer from a falseness and unreality based on limited observation of life. She acknowledges his talent as a writer, but disapproves of his sentimental stock characters – “preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans” and “melodramatic boatmen and courtesans” (111). Ultimately, she finds his work as unsuccessful at portraying “the emotional and tragic” as it is successful at showing “the humorous and external” (111). And since Eliot believes in art’s power to awaken sympathies and advance humane ends, she declares that his misrepresentations of peasant life are particularly reprehensible. Since the task of representing “the People” is a “sacred” one, she argues, “falsification here is far more pernicious than in the artificial aspects of life” (110). Crude sketches and caricatures are both aesthetic and political flaws.
Thus far Eliot’s social theory seems to grow out of Burkean conservatism. But her species of organicism quickly evolves away from its Burkean ancestor. For although Eliot rejects a bureaucratic rationalism that would operate mechanically upon society, she does not romanticize the organic society and its flaws. Nor does she look kindly on idealistic art, either; she disapproves of the novelist falsifying life by being too sympathetic to his or her subject. Eliot can be quite scathing in her own unsentimental portrait of the English peasant, as she points out his “slow gaze, in which no sense of beauty beams, no humour twinkles” (109). “The slow utterance, and the heavy slouching walk,” she bluntly states, “remind one rather of that melancholy animal the camel, than of the sturdy countryman, with striped stockings, red waistcoat, and hat aside, who represents the traditional English peasant” (109). Eliot also refuses to promote false notions of peasant honesty – while a poor Englishman may be “innocent of any adroit arithmetical cheating,” she claims, “he is not the less likely to carry home his master’s corn in his shoes and pocket” (109). In both these examples, Eliot faults pseudo-realist art for being too generous to the workers and peasants it represents. She rejects faith in mechanical, context-free progress, but refuses to sentimentalize the organic society’s real flaws errors. For someone who insists on the superiority of organic understandings of society to mechanical, rationalist ones, Eliot has no desire to glorify the people who inhabit it.

Hence while Eliot maintains that society should be understood as an organically growing development, she does not insist that this development must be preserved in anything resembling its original form. Unlike Burke, she is not nostalgic for a conservative past. Her objection to “mechanistic” theories of society is not that they destroy a praiseworthy, well-functioning world,
but that they don’t deliver on the reforms they promise. Eliot’s example of liberal interference is a revealing one:

Instead of allowing the peasants to manage their own affairs, and, if they happen to believe that five and four make eleven, to unlearn the prejudice by their own experience in calculation, so that they may gradually understand processes, and not merely see results, bureaucracy comes with its ‘Ready Reckoner’ and works all the peasant’s sums for him – the surest way of maintaining him in his stupidity, however it may shake his prejudice. (122)

Eliot has just spent several pages repeating details from Riehl’s book on the lives of German peasants, giving her a number of plausible examples of an organic society clashing with mechanistic change. And yet here she introduces basic arithmetic as her example of rationalizing, liberal interference. This choice of example stacks the deck in favor of rationalism; the peasant in this example is inarguably wrong and the intruding reformer is inarguably right. Mechanistic interference should be rejected, not because it misses the wisdom in organic life, but because its rejection of organicism keeps reason from taking root. For Eliot, forceful efforts at change are doomed to fail; as Avrom Fleishman has argued, she believes in “the notion that ‘intellectual errors’ … can’t be simply expunged but remain part of the person who held them” (31). But Eliot’s example does not argue that this natural thought process should be respected or preserved – indeed, she calls it stupidity. Her only complaint is that mechanical “bureaucracy” (122) doesn’t eradicate error; her hopes rest in letting it gradually fade away.
Eliot does not present the weight of prejudice and error as a Burkean “inheritance” we should treasure; while she rejects mechanical change, she is not at all opposed to a radical transformation of society. Her objection is simply that “what has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws” (127). Arguably, in fact, Eliot simply follows Burkean organicism to its logical conclusion – she is interested not just in the ongoing life of the social organism, but its eventual death. Since the “internal conditions” of human beings are linked to the “external conditions which society has inherited from the past,” which are themselves the product of “inherited internal conditions” (122) of earlier generations, no sudden dose of rationality will cure longstanding errors. But Eliot does look forward to a “purely rational society” – she simply insists that this society will only exist once the world is full of “purely rational men” (127). Obtaining this rational society outside of gradual organic development, Eliot argues, is like wishing for “the leafy shade of the forest without the secular growth of trunk and branch” (127). Hence the ultimate goal – a rational society that has rejected the errors of the past – remains, for Eliot, a valuable one. The conservatism of her organic secularism only applies to means, not ends.

“The Natural History of German Life,” then, unites organic development with secular, skeptical ends. This combination reappears throughout her writing on religion, perhaps most directly in her polemic “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming.” On one hand, “Evangelical Teaching” is a scathing attack on evangelical religion. Her rhetoric is uncharacteristically caustic from the beginning, as she announces that this form of Christianity provides an ideal place for a man who wants to “reconcile small ability with great ambition, superficial knowledge with the prestige of erudition, a middling morale with a high reputation for sanctity” (38). She has no
trouble calling the beliefs expounded by Dr. Cumming “profoundly mistaken and
pernicious” (40), accusing him of “astounding ignorance” (47). Dr. Cumming, she argues, is so
devoted to narrow-minded dogma that he is utterly unable to engage with the “eminently
instructed and earnest men who regard the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as a series of
historical documents, to be dealt with according to the rules of historical criticism” (49). But the
problem is not simply that evangelical teaching is incorrect; for Eliot, it actively destroys the
humane ends that religion, at its best, can teach. Dr. Cumming’s hostility to Higher Criticism or
any other Biblical scholarship leads him to overlook the biggest challenge to conventional
religious faith: those men and women who “find the dogmatic scheme built on the letter of the
Scriptures opposed to their profoundest moral convictions” (49). Evangelical Christianity, Eliot
suggests, is not merely misguided. It stands in opposition to the very best that humanist or
religious doctrines alike have been able to develop, by neglecting moral judgment and “assigning
to dogmas, based on a very complex structure of evidence, the place and authority of first
truths” (44).

Eliot does not refrain from attacking Christianity because of its deep roots in English
society. She clearly rejects literalist interpretations of the Bible as untrue and ethically
counterproductive. (In her private letters, Eliot could be even more contemptuous, declaring that
“the system of doctrines built upon the facts of [Jesus’] life and drawn as to its materials from
Jewish notions to be most dishonourable to God, and most pernicious in its influence on
individual and social happiness” (quoted in Fleishman 29). But despite her unusually strident
rhetoric, she does not transform herself into a militant opponent of the religious beliefs she
criticizes. Even if conventional forms of Christianity seem hopelessly misguided to Eliot, she
remains optimistic that something genuinely praiseworthy will emerge from these questionable beginnings. In order to retain this optimism while rejecting evangelical Christianity, Eliot insists that human nature has the capacity to survive even the most regrettable dogmas. “Fatally powerful as religious systems have been,” she insists, “human nature is stronger and wider than religious systems” (65.) And to support her confidence, Eliot returns to the organic metaphors that play such an important role in her social theory. Dogmas, Eliot claims, “may hamper” humanist values but “cannot absolutely repress [their] growth” (65). “Build walls round the living tree as you will,” she states, “the bricks and mortar have by and by to give way before the slow and sure operation of the sap” (65). Here, unlike in “The Natural History of German Life,” Eliot seems to uphold a more conventional notion of organicism; in this analogy the organically growing entity represents the humanist value system that thrives despite religion’s best efforts. But if Eliot is not entirely consistent on whether organic growth is inherently desirable, a general pattern nonetheless emerges: she praises society’s organic growth while rejecting many of the specific beliefs that evolve with it.

Eliot adds a third option to the secularism debate. She embraces the goal of secular humanism and the methods of organic conservatism. To be sure, this answer to the problem might appear to be an unsatisfying compromise at first. But Eliot’s emphasis on growth makes her “organic secularism” seem like a viable solution. Perhaps one way to characterize her attitude toward secularism and the organic society is to say that she adopts Burke’s interest in discovering the “latent wisdom” within “general prejudices” (87) and retains his emphasis on cautious growth. She admires Burke’s general inclination to “preserve and to reform” (169). But she rejects Burke’s notion of an “entailed inheritance” and would not accept his dismissive
account of “a spirit of innovation” (33). Instead, we might say that Eliot takes the conservative or antisecularist plea for gradual change at its word. Certainly, Eliot is no radical opponent of religion. Her warnings about the dire consequences of bureaucratic liberalism overlap with many postcolonial challengers of secularism like Ashis Nandy: both would agree that in their particular historical moment, a “theology of tolerance” has more to offer than the “various secular theories of statecraft” (338). But Eliot would not claim that “the ideology and politics of secularism have more or less exhausted their possibilities” (Nandy 326); instead, she argues that the genuine insights of secularism have not yet bloomed. The distinction is subtle but crucial: for Eliot, secularism is not a failed ideology but a magnificent transformation that needs time to grow. Her attitude toward secularism and the organic society most closely mirrors the cautious, moderate position of Partha Chatterjee, who argues that “if the struggle is for progressive change in social practices sanctioned by religion, then that struggle must be launched and won within the religious communities themselves” (377). Eliot, then, adopts anti-Enlightenment means to reach secular ends. Instead of choosing between modernity or traditionalism, Eliot has a new answer: “Modernity – eventually.”

Eliot’s secularism frankly acknowledges one of the charges that scholars have often directed at Enlightenment rationalism: the claim that its secularism is not a “simple repudiation of religion” (Madan 308) but is in fact deeply intertwined with religion in general and Protestantism in particular. Many of secularism’s most caustic critics consider this a particularly devastating blow to the naive, self-satisfied versions of modernity. For postcolonial antisecularists, secularism exported outside of the West becomes a sort of “imperialism of categories” (Nandy 321). Meanwhile, as José Casanova notes, secularism’s Christian roots also
form the main target of “Nietzschean-derived critical genealogies of modernity” which “question the legitimacy of the modern secular age and its disciplinary and civilizing project precisely because of its bastard Christian lineage” (267). These two attacks both uncover the Christian roots of irreligious humanism, to the supposed dismay of secularists. But Eliot’s own brand of organic secularism is particularly adept at dodging these charges. She is happy to concede that secularism is the product of a Christian society that gradually evolves away from its origins. In her view, that is its virtue; secularism is not imposed from above but develops from within a largely religious context. Her emphasis on gradual development within particular contexts makes her variety of secularism aware of the differences between cultures – and the problems with simply imposing a solution designed for one context upon another. And Eliot’s frank acknowledgment of secularism’s Christian roots – indeed, her refusal to rush into a secular mode when it’s clear that society is not yet ready to abandon its religious background – means she is utterly unimpressed by any triumphant narrative where secularism simply rejects religion instead of gradually transcending it. Of course, Eliot remains committed to a secular end state, which will not satisfy anti-secularists who insist that religion must retain a prominent place in the social order. But by grounding her secularism in a gradual emergence from Christianity, Eliot stresses evolution over a sharp break with the past. Her secularism softens its hostility to religious traditions, even if it remains fundamentally opposed to them.

Thus Eliot’s interest in organicism combines a respect for gradual development with a desire to see society’s irrational prejudices wither away. And her fiction works to make this organic secularism, in her words, “thoroughly incarnate” (quoted in Danto 176) in its language and forms – an aspiration Arthur Danto calls “an impeccable philosophy of art” (178). For “The
Natural History of German Life” argues that language, like societies, grow organically. Eliot makes this comparison explicit, declaring that “the historical conditions of society may be compared with those of language” (128). Like society, language is “in anything but a rational state” (128). Languages are cluttered and complicated – “one word stands for many things, and many words for one thing” (128). Ultimately, Eliot laments, language is “an instrument which scarcely anything short of genius can wield with definiteness and certainty” (128). But despite language’s problems and limitations, Eliot rejects any naive scheme to replace it with “a patent deodorized and nonresonant language, which effects the purpose of communication as perfectly and rapidly as algebraic signs” (128). This plan would drain language of “its music and its passion ... its vital qualities as an expression of individual character ... its subtle capabilities of wit” (128). As with societies, Eliot argues, rationality loses its power when it is imposed from above. Instead, language, like society, must “grow in precision, completeness, and unity, as minds grow in clearness, comprehensiveness, and sympathy” (128). The word “grow” is key here: society and language alike may have their “roots intertwined with the past” (128), but Eliot looks forward to a day when the “perfect ripeness of the seed which carries with it a life independent of the root” (128-9) arrives. Language and society alike cannot be severed from their roots – yet. But like roots, society’s problems and irrationalities are not intrinsically valuable. They are simply necessary for further development, until the time arrives when they can be abandoned once and for all.

Since Eliot extends this revisionary organicism to language and society alike, it comes as no surprise that this view also influences her fiction. As Suzanne Graver has argued, there is “no doubt that in George Eliot’s mind an aesthetic of organic form combined with an organic social
ideology” (183). And as with her social theory, in her “Notes on Form in Art,” Eliot seems at first to follow conventional notions of the organic. Form, according to Eliot, depends on the interplay of differences within a coherent unity. “Fundamentally,” Eliot claims, “form is unlikeness ... every difference is Form” (232). Even the distinction between form and content (or “Matter” (232)) relies on difference. But form is not simply difference by itself. At its root, it depends on “the discrimination of wholes and then on the discrimination of parts” (232). It is here that the organic element returns to Eliot’s thought, as she argues that the finest example of difference and unity can be found in organisms themselves. Just as human beings unite “things as diverse as the finger-nails and tooth-ache ... the nervous stimulus of muscle ... and the discernment of a red spot on a field of snow” (232), artistic form combines distinct parts into a coherent unity. Ultimately, Eliot finds in this combination of difference and unity a means of judging aesthetic accomplishment. She claims that the “highest Form” is also “the highest organism, that is to say, the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena” (232). Eliot defines artistic achievement in terms popularized, almost a century later, in the New Criticism: a judicious balance of parts integrated into a coherent whole.

Just as Eliot’s conception of organic form seems to closely track the canonical version of the theory laid out in Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria, so too does her interest in human emotion as the source of art seem distinctly Romantic. Her language of wholeness and diversity discerned through discrimination of wholes and parts seems quite close to Coleridge’s famous definition of a poem as a “species of composition ... proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth ... proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct
gratification from each component *part*” (II.13). Furthermore, Eliot argues that poetic and literary form is not merely a conglomeration of parts and wholes, but a direct response to social life. Form, she argues, is best understood as a byproduct of human emotion and feeling (again, a theory not far removed from the Romanticism that precedes her). The fundamental building blocks of poetry and literature – the “choice and sequence of images and ideas” – derive from a particular set of feelings which are “not only determined by emotion but intended to express it” (233). This poetic tendency to organize human emotion, Eliot suggests, is the essence that defines both literary form and literature itself. While she concedes that “sometimes the wider significance of poetry is taken to be fiction or invention,” she once again insists on emotion and form as foundational: “But what is fiction other than an arrangement of events or feigned correspondences according to a predominant feeling?” (233). Reconciling parts and wholes proves to be a means of sustaining the emotions that animate the poetic “organism.”

Since form is fundamentally a matter of selection and organization, for Eliot, it accompanies poetry at even the most basic of levels. Poetry “begins when passion weds thought by finding expression in an image,” and form adds “a choice of elements, however, meagre, as the accordant expression of emotional states” (234-5). As such, form is inextricable from the emotions that inspire poetry; even the “most monotonous burthen chanted by an Arab boatman on the Nile” contains “a beginning of poetic form” (235). Moreover, Eliot claims that even the most impressive literary forms, ultimately, can be traced back to similarly humble origins. The “ballad epic” grows out of “the rhythmic shouts with clash of metal accompanying the huntsman’s or conqueror’s course”; likewise, lyric poetry finds its origins in “the funeral or marriage sing-song ... with more or less violent muscular movement and resonance of wood or
metal” (235). Although Eliot calls this claim a “stale observation” (235), we should not underestimate the significance of this argument. It grounds literary form in “spontaneous unreflecting” (235) activity, the organization of emotional responses. As with her Romantic predecessors and the formalists who followed her, Eliot refuses to treat form as a superficial or trivial byproduct of thought and feeling. It instead becomes an organically developed expression of that feeling.

But once again, Eliot takes this organicism to unexpected places. Unlike Burke and Coleridge, Eliot distinguishes between organicism as a process and an organic entity. As with societies, so too with literature and art; Eliot values the process of organic development but does not insist that these organic entities should be preserved in some original form. In fact, Eliot concludes her “Notes on Form in Art” with an ambivalent reflection on the value of form itself. While she pursues the organism comparison that she has developed, she compares literary form to “the shell of an animal” (235). This shell is not a vessel that “should hold emotional expression” (235) – poetry, for Eliot, is not a species of hermit crab. Instead the shell is created by the animal, emotion, which develops this form “by the recurrence of its elements in adjustment with certain given conditions of sound, language, action, or environment” (235).

Since the shell is created by the organism and does not simply house life forms, Eliot implies, it is wrong to value the form over the thought that generates it. Eventually, form turns into convention, and poetry, “from being the fullest expression of the human soul, is starved into an ingenious pattern-work, in which tricks with vocables take the place of living words fed with the blood of relevant meaning” (235). As in Eliot’s disparaging remarks on the dream of a pristine,
logical language, her aesthetic theory resists the idea of form severed from the social needs that create it.

We are left with an odd paradox: an “organic form” that is central for expressing emotion but, under certain conditions, nothing more than empty technique. And Eliot’s disparaging remarks about “pattern-work” might seem to be a realist rejection of form, favoring detailed observation over conventional artistic patterns. This would make Eliot an anti-formalist realist of the sort described in George Levine’s *The Realistic Imagination*, a producer of “narratives touched by the realistic impulse” that “try to resist or circumvent the formal conventions of narrative” (15). But “Notes on Form in Art” refutes this reading of Eliot, who claims that form is inextricable from literature (even as she remains suspicious of its tendency to ossify). While she rejects the idea that any given form has a sacred status that makes it inherently worthy of preservation, she does not simply oppose life and its “variety and energy against the enclosing and determining forms of art” (Levine 57). Instead, she is ambivalent; form is indispensable as a product of emotion or thought, but conventional forms, when removed from that emotional origin, become impediments to real art. Literary form organizes the best thoughts and habits developed in life, but no form is valuable in itself – and when a form becomes nothing more than empty pattern-work, it must be discarded.

Consequently, Eliot’s formal experimentation in many ways surpasses Trollope’s. Her task is not simply discovering a literary form that proves hospitable to organic secularism. Instead, she tries out variations on this theme, testing the strengths and weaknesses of her social theory when grounded in new fictional modes. To be sure, there are patterns throughout Eliot’s fiction. Her work consistently offers a sympathetic but unsentimental look at social groups,
tracing the lives of characters as they become more perceptive about their world. And formally, Eliot tends to use the resources of the long Victorian novel, embracing multiple plots woven into a whole, described through a largely detached narrator—all characteristics emphasizing development and distance, two cornerstones of her social theory. But Eliot never lets this pattern settle into routine. In order to keep her writing from dwindling into mere “pattern-work,” she tests organic secularism by experimenting with different forms. And it is with this experimentation in mind that I turn to two very different Eliot texts, each designed to explore the strengths and weaknesses of her social and aesthetic theories: “The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton,” from *Scenes from Clerical Life*, and her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. “Amos Barton” explores the possibilities of short fiction, concentrating Eliot’s organic secularism into the form of the sketch. *Daniel Deronda*, on the other hand, uses two distinct plots to contrast a gradual narrative of development with a story of radical, abrupt transformation. The novel’s Gwendolen plot emphasizes slow enlightenment, while the Daniel plot joins its sudden transformation to plot devices that challenge the narrative’s secular foundations. Thus while Eliot remains concerned with secular development throughout her whole life as a novelist, she never becomes complacent about her theories. As she argues, moral development relies on gradual change and transformation; this principle of change reappears in her aesthetics.

* 

From the first page of “Amos Barton,” Eliot foregrounds her themes of growth and development. The plot—what little of it there is—traces how the community of Shepperton outgrows their unwarranted suspicion of their pastor, the Reverend Amos Barton, eventually finding sympathy for him. Even the first sentence unites these subjects of religion and
transformation, as the narrator lets the church become a synecdoche for Shepperton itself. The narrator draws our attention to the changes in the building, declaring that “Shepperton Church was a very different-looking building five-and-twenty years ago” (5). There is, we are told, some continuity over the quarter-century: a “substantial stone tower” with a clock bearing a “friendly expression of former days” (5). Nevertheless, these more permanent elements are isolated moments of similarity; “everything else” (5) has changed around them. The narrator provides a quick catalog of all the new transformations within the church, from the “slated roof flanking the old steeple” to the new windows, now “tall and symmetrical,” to the new doors “resplendent with oak-graining” (5). The church is transformed within and without, now boasting “well-shaped benches” available to all worshippers and “pews reserved for the Shepperton gentility” (5). Eliot devotes the first paragraph of “Amos Barton,” then, to grounding her themes of social and religious change in a religious place. Shepperton Church becomes an emblem of radical transformation within an institution. As U. C. Knoepflmacher argues, “time and change are the only constants in the evolutionary world that George Eliot portrays” (46).

As the description of the church continues, the narrator introduces the complex blend of gradual improvement, clear-eyed recognition of error, and nostalgia for the past that marks much of Eliot’s attitude toward the organic society. For some people, the narrator recognizes, these changes are clearly an “immense improvement,” fit to be classed alongside other reforms like the “New Police, the Tithe Commutation Act, the penny-post, and all guarantees of human advancement” (5). In fact, the narrator quickly extends this analogy, drawing a parallel between Shepperton Church and the conflict between liberal reform and conservative nostalgia. For not
everyone embraces these changes as signs of progress. Others, the narrator tells us, have moments when “imagination does a little Toryism by the sly ... revelling in regret that dear, old, brown, crumbling, picturesque inefficiency is everywhere giving place to spick-and-span new-painted, new-varnished efficiency” (5). The narrator, echoing the ambivalence of “The Natural History of German Life,” seems torn between these two views. Instead of choosing progress or nostalgia, the narrator has more complicated feelings: “an occasional tenderness for old abuses ... a sigh for the departed shades of vulgar errors” (5). In both phrases, the narrator acknowledges some affection for the old Shepperton Church, while admitting that there were legitimate reasons to remove those mistakes. This clash between reform and nostalgia structures the rest of the descriptive passage, as the narrator describes the church’s new “low partitions” that provide greater clarity – worshippers can “see everything at all moments” – along with a “dreary absence of contrast and mystery” (6). The reforms bring undeniable benefits – they are a triumph of rationalism and clarity over mystery and obscurity. But the narrator understands how sentimental attachment for the past lingers on. Change, for the narrator, brings both gains and losses at once.

The narrator extends these insights from the church itself to the worshippers within it. Just as the building undergoes a gradual, half-welcome transformation, so too does worship itself evolve over time. Shepperton Church has replaced its old forms of singing with a “mechanical affair of official routine” (6) – the narrator’s language here clearly echoing the disapproving terms Eliot used to describe bureaucratic reform. Instead of routine, worship once “had a drama” (6). It began with a process “as mysterious and untraceable as the opening of the flowers or the breaking-out of the stars” (6); worship’s “reformation,” for the narrator, moves from the
mysterious growth of flowers to mechanical regularity. The old worship was a magnificent performance, led by a choir that was “occasionally known to draw hearers from the next parish” (6). The narrator is so enthusiastic about this old form of worship, seemingly so preferable to the routine of the modern church, that it comes as a humorous surprise when we learn that this old worship, its passion and energy notwithstanding, wasn’t particularly good. In fact, the singing is at its best when the worshippers sing an anthem with “both words and music lying far beyond the reach of the most ambitious amateur in the congregation” (6) – in part due to the absence of hymnals. Like the church building itself, the process of gradual reform in worship has its disadvantages, and the narrator’s admitted nostalgia for the past makes it clear that something has been lost. But the narrator also points out that those changes, painful though they may be, are genuine improvements.

The narrator’s ambivalence toward modernization is matched by an ambivalence in the narration. For the narrative voice in “Amos Barton” shuffles back and forth between two positions that Robyn Warhol identifies as engaging and distancing narrators. For Warhol, “a distancing narrator discourages the actual reader from identifying with the narratee, while an engaging narrator encourages that identification” (31). Distancing narrators tend to be ironic, while engaging narrators “attempt to inspire the readers’ sympathetic action” (41). Eliot’s fiction, Warhol argues, blurs the lines between these two modes, moving “between engaging insistence upon the story’s reality and distancing acknowledgments of its fictionality” (133). This blurring is particularly apparent in _Scenes of Clerical Life_, as Eliot draws the reader close at some moments only to insist on distance at others. At moments the narrator takes on the role of welcoming host to the reader’s guest, “bent on introducing you” (Eliot 26) to characters in the
novel as though they were real, and advising us that “we will at once quit” a scene that has served its purpose. But elsewhere the narrator aims for a distancing effect, at one point dismissing the reader as “most likely ... a miserable town-bred reader” (8) who has no familiarity with everyday life – here embodied in cream and tea – in rural England. Eliot never clarifies just what role the reader of *Scenes of Clerical Life* should play, nor the narrator’s stance toward that reader.

This inconsistency, though, serves a greater purpose. Eliot aims to blend sympathetic and critical forms of narration. Her use of engaging narration imagines the reader or narratee as someone capable of deep understanding and compassion, while her use of distancing narration makes it clear that such understanding is difficult to achieve and not yet fully developed. Even the examples above, trivial as they may be, show this dynamic at work. When the narrator “introduces us” to characters, the text treats these characters as human beings on the same level as the narratee, not textual creations or products of the author’s imagination. But when the narrator informs the reader of his or her failure to understand the benefits of rural life – in this case, the high-quality tea and cream unavailable to urban readers – the emphasis shifts from the reader’s potential to the reader’s limitations or oversights. This combination of sympathy and frank acknowledgment appears in far weightier narrative intrusions, as in the narrator’s declaration that “by the help of dear friendly illusion ... we are able to dream that we are doing much good – and we do a little” (14). The passage’s engaging traits (its use of “we” to link the narrator and the narratee, its acknowledgment of the real possibilities for goodness that human beings possess) sit side by side with the distancing traits (its reminder that we never fully know ourselves, and our best efforts to do so are never quite successful). These mixed characteristics
of Eliot’s narration – its emphasis on sympathy and distance alike – perfectly fit her secularism. In form and content, Eliot acknowledges the good that exists within those around her without excusing their flaws, and she remains confident that change for the better is (eventually) possible. Her blend of engaging and distancing narration might be characterized “aspirational.”

Throughout the story, “Amos Barton” maintains this balance between sympathy for the past and appreciation for reform. Even so, Eliot’s sympathy does not prevent her from expressing severe judgments on characters. One of the farmers’ main traits, we are told, is their “rustic stupidity,” and the town’s miners display “obstreperous animalism” (20). Consequently, the narrator informs us, preachers have a difficult challenge in reaching the Shepperton congregation. A skilled minister must translate the thoughts of a “geographical, chronological, exegetical mind” into the language of listeners who are “neither geographical, chronological, nor exegetical” (22). The repetition of adjectives here signals that Eliot associates education with an extended awareness of space, time, and interpretive powers. The narrator’s “natural history” of English life is no less blunt, then, than Eliot’s “Natural History of German Life.” Nor does the narrator particularly admire the Reverend Amos Barton, even though he becomes a genuine object of sympathy. In part Barton’s failings lie in his inability to reach a difficult audience, since he lacks a “flexible imagination” and “adroit tongue” (23). But Barton is no intellectual himself; the narrator points out that he is a scholarly lightweight. Even others in this rustic town notice that he, as the narrator delicately puts it, “had not the gift of perfect accuracy in English orthography and syntax ... was known not to be a Hebrew scholar, and not in the least suspected of being an accomplished Grecian” (19). (The narrator also tells us, with a hint of malice, that Barton’s “clerical bretheren” (20) share these limitations.) Furthermore, Barton has a weak grasp
of theology – he is easily swayed from his Low Church inclinations thanks to some “unwonted reading and unwonted discussion” (26). At best, Barton’s preaching “shows praiseworthy intentions inadequately fulfilled” (20). The Shepperton churchgoers are not particularly astute, but neither is their preacher.

Yet while the narrator finds fault with Barton and his congregation, decrying their intellectual and theological feebleness, the story does not suggest that a different form of Christianity would solve their problems. In fact, the conclusion of “Amos Barton” presents Eliot’s secularism in its clearest form. The story ends tragically with the death of Barton’s wife, provoking a sympathetic response from the town. The townsfolk, regretting their hasty judgment of Barton, view him with “respectful pity” (59) and begin to welcome him into their lives – until Barton is reassigned to a manufacturing town far away. Ultimately, his sorrows bring out the best in Shepperton, awakening their “better sympathies” (62). But this development has nothing to do with Barton’s religious belief or practices. Even as the town recognizes their new sympathy for Barton and his role in this growth, they retain their low opinion of Barton as a pastor. None “thought his spiritual gifts pre-eminent, or was conscious of great edification from his ministry” (62). Ultimately, the narrator claims, “Amos failed to touch the spring of goodness by his sermons, but he touched it effectually by his sorrows” (62-3). Whatever good he brings to Shepperton springs from his humanity, not Christianity or the Church of England. The church accomplishes nothing but increasing Barton’s misery, forcing him to move from a town that has begun to embrace him. The church’s decision to relocate Barton is not even a well-meaning error in judgment, but simply nepotism at work – one of Barton’s superiors wants to “give the curacy of Shepperton to his own brother-in-law” (62). Eliot is no radical, and her satire on the
Church of England here is fairly mild; religious institutions in “Amos Barton” are ineffectual, not malign. But if we compare her view of the church to Trollope’s, her skepticism appears clearly. Trollope’s Church of England performs a valuable service by adhering to a vague, non-dogmatic faith, but Barton’s value to Shepperton lies in the sympathies he awakens, not the religion he represents.

Thus “Amos Barton” sets a thematic pattern that will reappear throughout Eliot’s fiction: a flawed society growing in sympathy without the aid of religious doctrine. What makes “Amos Barton” a compelling introduction to Eliot’s organic secularism – along with the other two stories in Scenes of Clerical Life – is the set of formal experiments that are largely confined, in Eliot’s writing, to this text. One of the most important of these experiments is “Amos Barton”’s narrator, whose voice can clearly be distinguished from her later narrators. Unlike her later fiction, where the narrative voice tends to be authoritative and detached, the narrative voice in “Amos Barton” often seems hesitant about its perspective. Knoepflmacher points out that the narrator’s “self-presentation is inconsistent” (56); we are never entirely certain how to characterize the speaker. At times, the narrative voice seems unusually modest compared to the confident voice of Eliot’s later fiction. As Knoepflmacher notes (57), the narrative voice is at one moment rejecting the idea that he is aware of the literary tradition – naming Virgil as a specific example – even as pages earlier he had “quoted Homer in Greek” (57). And although the narrator presents himself as a modest thinker from the start, declaring that his mind is not “well-regulated” (5), he is also able to refer offhandedly to obscure theological controversies surrounding the doctrine of the Incarnation (30). Just as the narrator alters between distancing and engaging modes of narration, it also moves between different levels of intellectual prowess.
This inconsistent level of intellectual narration emerges from another inconsistency: the degree to which the narrator is himself a character in the story. Unusually for Eliot, this narrator explicitly claims to be a character inhabiting the world of Shepperton. The opening passage describing the past and present Shepperton Church, for example, emerges out of the narrator recollecting his own childhood. He remembers looking at the church’s chancel and discovering “inexhaustible possibilities of meaning” there, reading the inscriptions on panels, hiding “with a sense of retirement” in the shadows of the old church, and finally his intense “burst into the conspicuousness of public life when [he] was made to stand up on the seat during the psalms or the singing” (6). This sense of narrative background might seem to justify the narrator’s intellectual modesty. But as with that sense of self-presentation, the narrator’s status as a character is inconsistent as well; with the exception of this paragraph, the narrator never again appears as a character in the story, and the philosophical passages where the narrator pauses to reflect give little indication that the voice speaking should be understood as an inhabitant of the story world.\(^\text{12}\) When the “I” reappears, it is typically in the form of an external narrator guiding the reader through the text – “just now I am bent on introducing you to Mr Bridmain and the Countess Czerlaski” (26), for instance, or “‘An utterly uninteresting character!’ I think I hear a lady reader exclaim” (36). “Amos Barton”’s narrator occupies an ambivalent place in the text, then, for two reasons: the story hesitates as to whether the narrator is a character or not, and cannot decide on the speaker’s intellectual level.

---

\(^{12}\) Several other examples of this sort of narrator appear in Eliot’s work: the first few pages of *The Mill on the Floss*, for instance, or the seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*. For a rare example of Eliot using genuine first-person narration, see “The Lifted Veil”; for the more familiar omniscient Eliot narrator, see, among others, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. 
U. C. Knoepflmacher sees these inconsistencies as an aesthetic flaw – a sign that “Amos Barton” is “a mere prelude for the consummate achievements” (54) of Eliot’s career. I would argue, instead, that the narrator of “Amos Barton” embodies the tension in Eliot’s work between organicism and detachment. Since Eliot argues that form is an outgrowth of experience, she adopts a narrator with roots in the community he describes. This reinforces the fiction that the narrative emerges from the life of the narrator, as if it were the product of someone’s own life experiences. The narrator must undergo the same process as his characters: slowly growing toward enlarged sympathies. (It is no coincidence that the narrator emerges as a character only when he discusses his ambivalence toward the changes at Shepperton; this hint of characterization reminds us of just how much Shepperton has been transformed.) But Eliot does not commit to this narrative voice, one embedded in the community he describes, because she also admires transcending the limits of that community. The philosophical and didactic ambitions of Eliot’s narration – defending realism in fiction, arguing for a sympathetic understanding of moral failings, presenting the shortcomings of clerical figures in a clear but kind manner – go far beyond the possibilities of the modest, diffident narrator Eliot gestures at creating. As Amanpal Garcha observes, “the plots in Scenes of Clerical Life do not produce in Eliot’s characters anything remotely like the narrator’s wisdom” (231); it would not be possible to combine the wisdom of an Eliot narrator with the small changes experienced by the story’s flawed characters. Eliot chooses the possibilities of her digressive voice over the limited perspective of a character. Her characteristic narrative style is far closer to the sympathetic but detached voice of “The Natural History of German Life”: affectionate toward her characters but honest about their limitations.
Just as the inconsistencies of narrative voice show us how Eliot hesitates between values of organicism and detachment, her choice of genre – the “scene” of the book’s title – is likewise ambivalent about the growth that the story takes as its theme. Amanpal Garcha’s *From Sketch to Novel* demonstrates that the sketch was a distinct Victorian form, one that both “acknowledged modernity through [its] fragmentary nature and offered respite from this changeability through [its] stasis” (16). And he rightly observes that *Scenes of Clerical Life* is part of the “sketch genre” (232), indulging in the stasis that the genre allows (especially through the narrative voice). The sketch form is thus an ambivalent response to modernity, making it particularly attractive for exploring secularization. And this ambivalence leads to an unresolved tension at the core of “Amos Barton.” If the sketch is a form created as a response to modernity and intended to counteract it, it makes a useful tool for a narrative that examines modernization’s benefits and dangers. But Eliot’s emphasis on gradual transformation clashes with the sketch form. The sketch stresses compression and stasis, while Eliot explores major change over a long period of time, the sort of change that is difficult to capture in a brief narrative. Hence, in the ending of “Amos Barton,” the narrator gestures at the changes that have begun to occur in the village of Shepperton without describing them in any detail. The text works hard against the constraint of the “scene” form – introducing plot, multiple chapters, and stretching the length of the sketch to its breaking point (indeed, each story in *Scenes of Clerical Life* was long enough to be serialized across multiple installments). But no sketch, even the lengthier ones here, can match the emphasis on change that appears in Eliot’s long fiction.

So has Eliot simply stumbled into a genre that is unsuited for her work? Some critics have made this argument. Knoepflmacher, as I have noted, dismisses *Scenes of Clerical Life* as
apprentice work, and Carol A. Martin argues that “Amos Barton,” for all its virtues, has a “slight” story that “makes little attempt to exploit the dramatic potential of the story” (92). But as with the inconsistent narrative voice, I would argue that the sketch form’s seeming unsuitability for narratives of growth make “Amos Barton” an intriguing generic experiment. To adapt her social theories to the sketch form, Eliot concentrates on moments when growth is particularly visible. “Amos Barton” does not describe Shepperton’s transformation from backwards hamlet to exemplar of secular enlightenment, because such a transformation is the work of many generations. None of Eliot’s novels could promise such a thing without abandoning realism for utopian fiction. But if the sketch form restricts Eliot’s ability to describe the transformation of individual lives, it allows her to focus on crucial moments when breakthroughs occur. Instead of presenting the long history of secular enlightenment, Eliot offers sketches that describe moments of beneficial change.

If we glance briefly at the other two stories in Scenes of Clerical Life, we see a number of common elements: her interest in moral development, her low opinion of religion’s intellectual powers, her unsentimental look at human ignorance, and her interest in organicism. “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” presents a vicar whose sermons never rise above the banal claim that “those who do wrong will find it the worse for them” (72), but who is described sympathetically as “sketched out by nature as a noble tree” though circumstances gave him “something of the knotted whimsical character of the poor lopped oak” (166). And like “Amos Barton,” “Janet’s Repentance” offers a plot focused on sympathy’s triumph over dogma. The narrative presents a conflict over the establishment Anglicans and evangelicals, centered on the new clergyman Mr. Tryan. It focuses on the protagonist, Janet, whose human sympathies overcome her initial
hostility to Tryan, leading her to forgive her abusive husband and develop a close friendship with Tryan himself, despite the religious differences that initially divided them. This story is also noteworthy for its use of the organic rhetoric found in “Natural History of German Life”: the narrator tells us that “always there is seed being sown silently and unseen” (204), leading to unexpected human flourishing, and characterizes the “blessed influence of one true loving human soul on another” as something “not calculable by algebra, not deducible by logic, but mysterious, effectual, mighty as the hidden process by which the tiny seed is quickened” (263). Like “Amos Barton,” “Janet’s Repentance” endorses human compassion over dogmatism, and places its faith in organic development instead of reason (which, the narrator tells us dryly, cannot account for the “obstinately irrational” (270) emotion that motivates our best actions). Formally, both stories match the two major characteristics of “Amos Barton” – the quasi-embedded narrator and use of the sketch form. “Mr. Gilfil” includes moments of direct address – for instance, “The last chapter has given the discerning reader ...” (89) – that recall “Amos Barton”’s first chapters, and “Janet’s Repentance” presents a narrator who proudly claims to be “on the level and in the press” (229) with imperfect, gradually improving men. Both stories can be thought of as variations on the themes that “Amos Barton” sets out; they even replicate the same basic plot structure, where social antagonism leads to a climactic death and newly awakened sympathy.

The formal elements of “Amos Barton,” and Scenes of Clerical Life more generally, that critics have often read as aesthetic flaws – the inconsistent narrative voice and the static, undramatic plot – are instead consequences of focusing on a single moment of growth. The content of “Amos Barton” seems quite familiar to those who have read her now more-familiar
later fiction: a gentle but unsentimental portrayal of a rural society coming to terms with change, philosophical digressions emphasizing the limits of our current knowledge and its gradual improvement, a sympathetic but decidedly non-Christian view of the well-meaning (if not particularly effective) Church of England, and so on. All these themes emphasize patient growth and slow change. What “Amos Barton” offers, unlike her later fiction, is a narrator who encapsulates the tension between rooted conservatism and distance, and a form that calls attention to one of many “unheroic acts” when the “growing good of the world” (838), as *Middlemarch* puts it, grows by the smallest fraction. After *Scenes of Clerical Life* Eliot’s fiction moves toward the heterodiegetic narrator and increasing length (with the notable exceptions of *Silas Marner* and *The Lifted Veil*)\(^\text{13}\). In her short fiction Eliot explores single moments of growth; in her longer fiction, she connects these individual moments across a longer narrative of development. And as Eliot experiments with the distancing narrative voice, her narrators focus less on nostalgia for the past than their insistence on constant, unrelenting growth.

*From Eliot’s first work of fiction to her last: *Daniel Deronda* shows that Eliot never grows comfortable with one form of exploring her organic secularism. In fact, *Daniel Deronda* is quite *uncomfortable* with its secularism, so much so that critics have disagreed about whether it marks a break from Eliot’s skeptical fiction. For Amanda Anderson, the novel balances a “refusal of false universalism or illusory detachment” with “the possibility and need for self-

\(^{13}\) Even the apparent exceptions to this statement are less exceptional than they might appear: while the first chapter of *The Mill on the Floss* has a narrator who appears to be a character in the novel, this chapter is much more clearly marked as prefatory than the narrative statements which begin “Amos Barton,” and the remainder of the novel adopts Eliot’s familiar authoritative narrative voice. Likewise, *Silas Marner* is only short compared to her other major novels; it is considerably longer than any of the stories discussed here. *The Lifted Veil* is perhaps the true exception to this trend – an experiment in first-person narration that stands apart in Eliot’s body of work.
reflective and dialogical affirmations of cultural heritage” (138) – evading the problems with cosmopolitanism while embracing the benefits it can provide. She reads the novel as a promotion of “cosmopolitan Judaism” (120), an expression of “Eliot’s fundamentally mixed attitude toward the instabilities of modern cosmopolitan life, and not as her attempt to flee those instabilities by constructing Jewish identity as an absolute ideal or ground” (121). George Levine, on the other hand, reads the novel as much less cosmopolitan or detached, pointing to “the almost mystically unironic Jewish section” which, he argues, runs counter to “the whole thrust of George Eliot’s art, and even of the Gwendolen sections” (Realism, Ethics and Secularism 42). I will argue here that Levine is correct about Daniel Deronda’s plot, and its departures from realism, but that Anderson is largely right to emphasize the novel’s commitment to secularism – even in the so-called “mystical” Daniel plot. The key to resolving these interpretations lies in Eliot’s exploration of two very different forms of secularism: one, located in the Gwendolen plot, the familiar organic secularism she theorized twenty years earlier in “The Natural History of German Life,” and the other, found in the Daniel plot, a strange secularism that explores sudden, radical transformation with narrative techniques that lie outside her traditional realism. The Gwendolen plot investigates how humanist growth can develop in someone with no social or religious roots; meanwhile, Daniel’s story experiments with a very different secularism, one that pairs radical and sudden change with deliberately artificial, non-realist plot devices. Together, the two plots expand Eliot’s organic secularism into new directions, with one narrative addressing how a feeling of community grows without religious or social origins, and the other exploring the sort of change that organicism alone cannot provide.
Gwendolen is an interesting test case for Eliot’s organic secularism: not only is she far removed from any sort of humanist enlightenment, she lacks the social roots that preserve and nourish people before secularism becomes a viable option. At the beginning of the third chapter, the narrator reminds the reader that a human “should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth” (16). Unfortunately, this “blessed persistence in which affection can take root had been wanting in Gwendolen’s life” (16), leading to Gwendolen’s selfish nature (as indicated in Book One’s blunt title “The Spoiled Child”). This language of roots in soil, which will frequently reappear throughout Daniel Deronda, points out the ethical advantages of local contexts. And this connection, we are told, brings subtle but incalculable benefits: it is a “spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection” (16). Those who live in a tightly knit community develop a sense of communal responsibility and empathy – for them, a “kindly acquaintance with all neighbors” becomes something as automatic and natural as “a sweet habit of the blood” (16). Since Gwendolen has always been rootless, she lacks this foundational sense of community. Her story extends the concerns of “Amos Barton” further back in time; she can only learn to surpass the limits of organicism once she has made use of its benefits.

This sort of frank nostalgia for a rooted self leads Terry Eagleton to argue that Daniel Deronda “represents an attempt to integrate liberal ideology, in both its Romantic and empiricist forms, with certain pre-industrial, idealist or positivist organic models” (124). Certainly Eagleton is right to argue that the novel finds both liberalism and organicism attractive. But even this early passage makes it clear that there are limits to this parochial society, useful though it may be. “At five years old,” the narrator tells us, “mortals are not prepared to be citizens of the
world, to be stimulated by abstract nouns, to soar above preference into impartiality” (16). As with Eliot’s discussion of peasant prejudice in “The Natural History of German Life,” this passage associates organicism with intellectual limitations. Eliot does not reject cosmopolitanism, just the idea of imposing it on those who are too immature for its benefits. (Here as before, this condescension hints at a less tolerant strain in Eliot’s secularism, one that infantilizes those further back along the “road to progress.”) The phrase “soar above preference into impartiality” is particularly revealing. Even as it praises organic growth and local roots, it acknowledges that the more desirable option – the one that rises above the limits of particular perspectives – is the cosmopolitan one. Organicism is valuable only because it can nurture growth when rationalism cannot. As with “The Natural History of German Life,” where Eliot introduces the analogy of arithmetic, the paragraph ends with a direct comparison to scientific reasoning: “The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one’s own homestead” (16). For Eliot, the real and indisputable virtues of organicism – its capacity to reach those in earlier stages of development, like children – go hand in hand with its limitations. The local perspective may be the best introduction to astronomy, but it is only an introduction. If these passages seem particularly fond of organicism, it is only because they describe a system that could have made Gwendolen better than she currently is.

Even as Gwendolen slowly develops a sense of her connection to the world around her, she does so on secular terms. Religion plays almost no role in Gwendolen’s growing maturity. She only acknowledges Judaism with brief, unthinking anti-Semitism, as when she responds with a “low tone of amazement” and “an utterly frustrated look” (687) upon learning that Deronda is a Jew. Neither does Christianity play a significant role in her life. In place of the well-meaning
but ineffectual Amos Barton, the only clergyman in *Daniel Deronda* is a minor character: Gwendolen’s uncle, the Reverend Gascoigne. And although he far surpasses the pastors of *Scenes of Clerical Life* in ability – he possesses a “native gift for administration” (23) – his skills are bureaucratic and not spiritual. He is “tolerant both of opinions and conduct,” has a mind that is “ecclesiastical rather than theological” (23), and never has a word to say about Christian belief or worship. The narrator praises his lack of “mischievous impracticableness in relation to worldly affairs” (24); Gascoigne is so sensible and worldly that he seems to have left spiritual matters far behind. He cannot, in short, offer Gwendolen the spiritual roots the narrator deems so important. His only real contribution to Gwendolen’s life is a negative one – as one of the firmest advocates for her marriage to Grandcourt, Gascoigne is unwittingly the instrument of her deep suffering. *Scenes of Clerical Life* has good-natured fun with the weak grasp of theology and scholarship among its clergymen; in *Daniel Deronda*, Christian belief has become vestigial even within the church, and it exercises no influence on Gwendolen.

Christianity thus appears unable to satisfy any of Gwendolen’s needs (spiritual or otherwise). It is so inadequate that it does not even exist in Gwendolen’s mind as a rival system to be overthrown. The narrator announces that Gwendolen had “always disliked whatever was presented to her under the name of religion, in the same way that some people dislike arithmetic and accounts” (51). Religion, for Gwendolen, is an annoying, superfluous social appendage, nothing more. The faint hints of a richer world around her – “those uneasy impressions of awe” Gwendolen occasionally feels – have nothing to do with “the religious nomenclature belonging to this world” (52). The vocabulary of religion is reduced to meaningless detritus, something as out of place as “her uncle’s surplices seen out of use at the rectory” (52). As Gwendolen’s story
is in large part a story of her growing awareness of this “undefined feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her” (52) and its source, this is a devastating remark. Christianity has no place in her discovery of a world beyond her own limitations. Religion contributes less to her gradual enlightenment than the “little astronomy taught her at school” (52), which at least hints at a vast world beyond her own perception. As the symbol of her uncle’s unused surplices suggests, Christianity is reduced to mere trappings, a hollow shell or substance-less form.

And as in “Amos Barton,” Gwendolen’s final leap into greater human sympathy (in a book revealingly titled “Fruit and Seed”) occurs without any help from religion. The climax of the novel comes when Gwendolen discovers “a vast mysterious movement” in which “her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving” (689). Gwendolen discovers a world far greater than her selfish mind could understand, in a sudden moment compared to a time “when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earthquake” (689) into her insular mind. Eliot flirts with religious imagery here; the narrator compares this transformative moment to “the imagery of the Hebrew poet” in which “the Invisible Power that has been the object of lip-worship and lip-resignation became visible” (689). It is even called a moment when “a religion shows itself which is something else than a private consolation” (689). And Gwendolen undergoes this momentous change when Daniel tells her about his plan to “awaken a movement in other minds” (688) by promoting Zionism. His devotion to something beyond the narrow scope of his life shakes Gwendolen from her complacency. But if this sympathetic knowledge is a “religion” of sorts, it is not a theistic one. Although Daniel brings Gwendolen to a “judgment of the Invisible and Universal” (653), both
these abstract phrases refer to ideals, not divine entities. Daniel, in fact, acts “in the stead of God” (653) to Gwendolen; his humanist intervention replaces a theistic one. Thus while the Gwendolen plot is a story of transformation, even redemption, Eliot secularizes both concepts of change and growth. Neither Gwendolen’s breakthrough nor Daniel’s assistance owe anything to conventional religious belief. The Gwendolen plot dramatizes how a sense of community can develop in a character with no religious inclination.

Of course, the Gwendolen plot has received far less attention in recent criticism of *Daniel Deronda* than the Deronda plot (or so-called “Jewish plot”), which gives religion a much more prominent and powerful role. If Gwendolen’s growth and maturing can be seen in entirely secular terms, as the gradual development of human sympathy with no relationship to Christianity, Deronda’s discovery of his Jewish heritage and his subsequent embrace of Zionism seems much more conventionally religious. So why does one religious faith appear irrelevant to any sense of ethical growth, while another becomes a catalyst for moral development? Part of the difference between the two plots can be ascribed, as Amanda Anderson has argued, to the cultural places that Christianity and Judaism occupied in Victorian Britain. As a religion practiced by a minority of British subjects, “the diasporic European Jew was always living between cultures, in some sense already in the position that the cosmopolitan sought to cultivate” (Anderson 130). Only the dominant Church of England, in other words, could foster Gwendolen’s comfortable ignorance. But although this might account for some of the differences between the two plots (and it is indeed worth noting that religion only gets discussed

14 As Adela Pinch has noted in her discussion of Gwendolen’s guilty feelings after Casaubon’s death, neither Eliot nor Daniel endorse the mystical beliefs Gwendolen entertains. They are similar to “Eliot’s position on belief in God”; Pinch claims, arguing that “Eliot tended to view religious belief as a potential means of moral development” (170), though one grounded in false beliefs about the world.
extensively in the Daniel plot), this cannot be the only explanation. If being a stigmatized religious minority were enough to foster ethical development, dissenting Protestants would also be suitable conduits for individual growth – and, as Eliot’s polemical essays would indicate, she does not view evangelical Protestants in a favorable light. Moreover, Eliot’s attack on the errors of religious belief is sweeping enough that Judaism would not have been spared her criticism. The unique situation of Judaism in Victorian Britain certainly makes it a better candidate for growing cosmopolitanism, as Anderson suggests, but it hardly avoids the sharp attack implied by Eliot’s secularism.

In part, the Daniel plot is simply more secular than critics have often realized. Anderson offers a plausible reading of this narrative, noting that many readers of the novel fail to distinguish between Daniel and Mordecai. Instead, she claims, “the text takes considerable pains to distance Daniel from Mordecai,” especially Mordecai’s “mystified nationalist ideal of organic destiny” (124). This distance is most apparent when Daniel visits Mordecai’s club, as the characters there present conflicting theories about Judaism’s future. Mordecai argues for a mystical sort of Zionism, using the now-familiar language of organicism. He believes “in a growth, a passage, and a new unfolding of life whereof the seed is more perfect, more charged with the elements that are pregnant with diviner form” (449). His Zionism longs for an “organic centre” that can restore the “unity of Israel” (454). But Mordecai is not the only voice to speak. He is challenged by an eloquent rival, Gideon, who suggests that the task ahead is assimilation: to lose “all our superstitions and exclusiveness” in order to “melt gradually into the populations we live among” (449). Gideon also favors a decidedly less traditional form of Judaism – he promotes the idea of “clearing our liturgy of all such notions as a literal fulfilment of the
prophecies about restoration ... a few useless rites and literal interpretations of that sort” (455).

He hopes for a future without religious discrimination, declaring that “we must wait patiently for prejudices to die out” (451) – language that echoes Eliot herself in “The Natural History of German Life.” Mordecai’s highly mystical Zionism receives a plausible challenge from Gideon’s cosmopolitan, liberal, assimilationist version of Judaism.

Furthermore, Daniel distances himself from many of Mordecai’s mystified claims (to use Anderson’s word). Perhaps most notably, he refuses to “profess the faith of [his] fathers” (620). While he happily calls himself a Jew, he also argues that “our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races” (620), thus affirming his cultural identity without simply adopting traditional Judaism. Daniel strikes a moderate compromise between Mordecai and Gideon, offering qualified support to Mordecai without endorsing his views on Zionism. He thus splits the difference between Mordecai’s organic Zionism and Gideon’s desire for assimilation. Initially, he seems to side with Mordecai’s defense of nationalism against the belief that development (in this case cosmopolitanism) is always a good thing. His conservatism here echoes Burke or Eliot herself, as he argues against the “sort of certitude about changes” that comes with “calling them development” (449). He warns against the possibility of “mistaking a tendency which should be resisted for an inevitable law that we must adjust ourselves to” (449), which Mordecai takes as support for his nationalist, organicist rhetoric. But he also offers a skeptical note that is wholly absent from Mordecai’s enthusiasm. Blindly following a new tendency under the guise of progress, Daniel suggests, is like following a “superstition or false god” (449). If we combine Daniel’s remarks on superstition with his refusal to simply adopt the faith of his ancestors, we see that his sympathy for Mordecai should not be equated with a
mystical, organic variety of religious faith. As William McKelvy argues, Daniel advocates for “a faith that allows living Jews to change the horizon of their beliefs” (249). He is cautious and open to gradual modernization – much like Eliot herself.

The best demonstration of Daniel’s attitude toward Judaism can be found midway through the novel, when he visits a synagogue for the first time. According to the narrator, Daniel feels a powerful attraction to Judaism because he feels the “presence of poetry” in “the forms of the Juden-gasse” (309). But his attraction does not lead him to reject cosmopolitanism. Instead, Daniel finds himself drawn to the “sense of union with what is remote” (309), indicating that his journey of self-discovery leads him to an expanded view of the world, not a retreat into a mystified organic community. Even when Eliot introduces the language of organicism into her description, she distinguishes between an organic growth valued for its own sake (as in Burke) and one with an instrumental purpose. The narrator compares faith at its best to “twin green leaves that will become the sheltering tree” (309) – the metaphor makes it clear that the growing tree, while valuable, is secondary to the virtues and hopes it serves. It is no surprise, then, that Daniel can find the experience of worship at the synagogue incredibly moving without subscribing to any particular religious doctrine. In fact, he understands little other than that he is “chiefly hearing Psalms and Old Testament passages or phrases” (310); the specific beliefs of Judaism disappear. Instead, what Daniel finds so attractive is the sense that this prayer lets him “escape from the limitations of our own weakness” and lets him invoke “all Good to enter and abide with us” (310). Both these attributes are wholly secular ones; they belong to a humanism that preserves virtues nurtured by religion while discarding any theological content. Daniel values Judaism because it can connect him with a history greater than himself. His interest in
religious belief and practice is more an interest in a “binding history” (310) that connects him to a world beyond his limitations. Consequently, Daniel ignores particulars of theology or doctrine, instead emphasizing “how individuals can connect their lives with events of history, and with a community – a people” (Scheinberg 831).

In one sense, then, the Daniel plot is as skeptical of religion as the Gwendolen narrative. Daniel has little interest in the specific beliefs of Judaism, and Gwendolen’s “redemption” has nothing to do with Christianity. But if the Daniel plot hardly rehabilitates religious belief, it nevertheless uses literary techniques that feel out of place in a work of secular realism. After all, as critics have noted, the logic of the Deronda plot makes Daniel’s eventual embrace of his heritage seem inescapable. Daniel seems destined to uncover his true identity – Mirah and Mordecai’s early belief in Daniel’s Jewishness is, in fact, correct. Peter Garrett argues that Daniel Deronda is “bent on doing everything” it can to help Daniel, following a “principle of wish-fulfillment” (177); Franco Moretti, less sympathetically, dismisses the Deronda plot as “a melodramatic fairy tale” (225); and Jules Law argues that the novel’s ending combines “the agon of imperialism with the telos of romance” (259). All three of these readings imply that the plot overrides any cosmopolitan impulses by guiding Daniel to a mystical, implausible discovery of his true self. Gideon may present a cogent and plausible case for cosmopolitanism, but he is a footnote in the novel, appearing only in one chapter. Furthermore, Daniel’s own private quibbles about religious belief, and his noted distance from Mordecai’s prophetic mode, seem to be vetoed by the plot devices that bring Daniel to Mirah and Mordecai. The novel’s plot seems so determined to guide Daniel to Mordecai that it crosses into wish-fulfillment: Daniel discovers
who he was always meant to be by a series of incredible coincidences. It stretches the genre of
the Bildungsroman or realist novel, as Moretti and Law observe, until it verges on romance.

Certainly the plot makes it seem inevitable that Daniel will embrace the destiny Mordecai
has discovered for him. But Daniel’s story is not a longing for the organic community papered
over with secular language. If the romance is a genre “which aims at the transfiguration of the
world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to
anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been
effaced” (110), as Fredric Jameson has argued, *Daniel Deronda* adapts and transforms the plot of
romance for different ends. “Transfiguration of the world of everyday life” is a fine description
of Daniel’s development, to be sure. But his life ahead, while admirable, is hardly Edenic or
Utopian. His life’s work, in fact, is just beginning; Daniel knows that his duty of “restoring a
political existence” (688) to the world’s Jewish population will not be one he can accomplish in
his own lifetime. He simply hopes that he might begin his work, “however feebly” (688) he does
it. (Moreover, he describes his mission in secular terms; Judaism, for Daniel, is a political and
ethnic identity much more than a religious one.) By ending the novel on an immense task to
come, the novel downplays the ideal ending of the marriage plot. In this way Daniel’s plot
mirrors Gwendolen’s; Jameson’s phrase “the transfiguration of the world of everyday life” is
equally applicable to Gwendolen’s plot as it is to Daniel’s. Indeed, when the narrator describes
Gwendolen’s transformation into a person aware of a world beyond selfish limitations, the text
deliberately uses theological language. The transformation becomes a moment when “the
submission of the soul to the Highest is tested” and “a religion shows itself which is something
else than a private consolation” (689). But here, too, Gwendolen’s new life is hardly utopian; in
her final words in the novel, part of her letter to Daniel on his wedding day, she hopes to “live to be one of the best of women” but does not “yet see how that can be” (694). In both cases, the transformation is not the end of a journey of development, but a sign that the journey is ready to begin. There are thus two problems with the “fairy-tale” reading of the Deronda plot: the Gwendolen plot, taken to be the realistic counterpart to Daniel’s story, is just as dependent on romance, and both plots leave the protagonists with an open ending promising a difficult journey to come.

The Daniel plot, consequently, borrows a wish-fulfillment structure from romance but removes its neat ending. Eliot makes this change because it lets her examine how Daniel changes without suggesting that his development is at an end. As a journey that detaches characters from a static and comfortable position to a new and challenging one, the romance plot serves as a useful tool for developing sympathy. But unlike in the conventional romance, which aims at a comfortable end for the characters to occupy, Daniel Deronda suggests that growth and transformation should remain a continuing process. Hence neither Gwendolen nor Daniel are given an ending where they can remain content with what they have achieved or discovered. Daniel’s life work is still ahead of him, but he intends to journey away from England, with no guarantee that he will ever return. His literal and figurative departure from the world of the novel indicates that, as one quest for greater sympathy and enlightenment has been completed, another is just beginning. And while Gwendolen does not embark on a literal journey as Daniel does, she too has a long life of gradual improvement ahead of her – the spiritual breakthrough and transformation that ends the novel is, as with Daniel, just a beginning. The romance plot, having achieved its desired ends, can be cast aside just when one would expect it to reach a tidy
conclusion. Eliot follows her own remarks on form in “Notes on Form in Art” – rather than letting the romance plot become “ingenious pattern-work” (235) with no connection to the content it portrays, Daniel Deronda discards the romance as soon as its value for eliciting growth disappears. Eliot borrows the romance plot to motivate character development, but she rejects its idealized endings because she sees no end to this long process of organic growth toward cosmopolitan, secular ends. Zionism functions, then, not by giving Daniel a new local community but by forcing him to leave his old world behind.

Daniel Deronda’s plots exist, then, to propel its characters through journeys of ethical development. Although both begin and end in very different places – as Garrett suggests, “Deronda begins at a stage of moral development which Gwendolen is barely approaching at the end” (174) – the pattern of transformation is the same. By stressing the pattern of growing sympathy and detachment from a prior self (even if, as in Daniel’s narrative, only to find a new set of attachments), the novel emphasizes that the process of growth remains more important than the ultimate end. As Gillian Beer argues, the novel “brings to the centre of our attention the idea of a future life” (173). By ending each plot with each character open to new developments, the novel indicates that the characters share changes to come, not just a similar set of accomplishments. Daniel’s self-imposed exile and embrace of Zionism, in other words, is only a more valuable end because he has consistently been better at detaching himself from a limited and parochial point of view – as when Daniel tells Sir Hugo early in the novel that he hopes to move past “a merely English attitude” (155). This shared emphasis on moral development unites
two distinct plots that critics have often, notoriously, insisted on reading separately.\textsuperscript{15} The famous opening chapter, with Daniel “rescuing” Gwendolen as she gambles her money away, can serve as a metonym for all the scenes with both characters: the link between the two plots is their shared concern with escaping the limitations of one’s current position and Daniel’s ability to further Gwendolen’s development. The specific achievements and obstacles of each plot become, in short, less important than the journey of development that they share. And the deliberately open endings make it clear that, whatever progress has been made, more work remains to be done.

Thus the romance plot justifies itself through its power to motivate character development. And yet it remains quite true that the Daniel plot relies on plot devices – prophecy, unbelievable coincidence, and so forth – that seem out of place in a work of realist fiction. Theresa Kelley has noted that the Daniel plot might be said to be “caught in the undertow of a creeping realism that finally takes over” (237); when Mordecai gets his wish that Daniel would be Jewish, it shows the novel moving past realism. So why include quasi-magical plot devices in a narrative that is not marked by its commitment to religion? Eliot resorts to these techniques because the novel calls on Daniel to make a greater transformation than Gwendolen, whose changes can be accomplished within the safe confines of realism. If the Gwendolen plot investigates how to develop humanist sympathies in a character deprived of any organic roots or beliefs, the Daniel plot asks its protagonist to abandon his family, friends, and nation for an entirely new task. Unlike Dorothea Brooke, who painfully discovers her inability to be a modern

\textsuperscript{15} As Sarah Gates has noted, the question of whether \textit{Daniel Deronda} has a single or double plot has been an active topic of debate ever since F. R. Leavis suggested amputating the Deronda sections of the novel and publishing the remainder as \textit{Gwendolen Harleth} (699). Perhaps the debate can be resolved by saying that \textit{Daniel Deronda} uses a double plot to explore a common problem.
St. Theresa, Daniel successfully undergoes a transformation that changes his very identity and separates him from the world he once knew. Realist plot devices, Eliot seems to suggest, cannot accomplish this radical and sudden transformation. Daniel thus represents – for good or bad – a character who surpasses the logic of organic secularism. The changes he undergoes are so remarkable that the realist novel cannot plausibly accommodate them. Kelley is right to argue, then, that *Daniel Deronda* combines realist and idealist plots. Yet I would not say that the novel “shuttles in ungainly fashion” (239) between the two plots. Instead, I argue that *Daniel Deronda* examines the limits of organic secularism from two distinct angles. The Gwendolen plot studies how enlightenment emerges in a character who never possessed the organic roots we see in “The Natural History of German Life” or “Amos Barton,” while the Daniel plot explores radical change, one more dramatic and sudden than any gradual secularism can accommodate.

And if *Daniel Deronda* juxtaposes two characters with very different narrative paths, it unites its these plots with one technique: a tolerant but authoritative narrative voice. The quasi-homodiegetic narration of “Amos Barton” appears nowhere in this work. The novel instead presents a narrator who has fully detached herself from the world she describes, never lowering herself to the level of her characters. Instead, the text freely offers advice, observations, and commentary – reminding readers that “in many of our neighbours’ lives, there is much not only of error and lapse, but of a certain exquisite goodness which can never be written or even spoken” (152). We might say that the narrator is in the same position to Daniel as Daniel is to Gwendolen, operating on a much higher level of ethical development and observing the gradual progress. By severing the link between narrator and character – that is, by abandoning the pretense that the narrator is an observer in the same world as the character – Eliot makes the
break from community appear even more clearly than the ambivalent narrator of “Amos Barton.”

The voice holding the novel together, the voice advising the reader how to behave and what sort of person to become, is a voice that no longer speaks from within a community that limits its perspective and knowledge. If, as Amanda Anderson claims, detachment and cosmopolitanism should be understood as a “characterological achievement” (31), Eliot’s narrative voice models that distance for the characters that Daniel Deronda presents. Just as Daniel serves as a model for Gwendolen, the narrator’s greater intellectual powers and distance serves as a second and even greater exemplar. This is an achievement that a partially embedded narrator cannot fully achieve – and Eliot, by choosing the distanced perspective over an embedded one, makes a decisive statement in favor of gradual detachment from the limitations of the past.

The same aspirational narrative stance familiar to us from Scenes of Clerical Life still exists, then, but the balance has subtly shifted from the virtues of the present to the possibilities of the future. It behaves according to what Harry E. Shaw has called “the logic of perfecting” (257), a process of development that emphasizes gradual growth toward a fuller and richer understanding or perspective. Shaw’s bold claim that “realist novelists create characters and situations so that they can be perfected” (256) rings true for Daniel Deronda, a novel whose plot and narration work to show gradual transformation beyond a limited perspective. If Eliot’s organic secularism always attempts to balance between what the world is and what it could be, Daniel Deronda constantly focuses on the second category. The sympathetic narrator remains, but Eliot’s famous philosophical declarations insist ever more on the need to become something different – more cosmopolitan, less provincial. While sympathy remains important (as Daniel claims, “affection is the broadest basis of good in life” (357)), sympathy in Daniel Deronda is
never an excuse for remaining comfortably ignorant, selfish, or narrow-minded. Instead, sympathy should produce knowledge and a desire to transcend ignorance. “Want of sympathy,” the narrator claims, “condemns us to a corresponding stupidity” (510), and the aspirational mode of the narration makes it clear that, for Eliot, sympathy for the limitations of our world should not impede the hope for gradual progress.

We should remember, finally, Partha Chatterjee’s claim that “there are no historical shortcuts” (377) to the process of secularization. In form and content alike, Eliot’s fiction explores the strengths and limitations of this statement. She embraces a cautious organic conservatism as the best way to reach a rational, secular world, and her fiction tests the continued viability of this position. “Amos Barton” compresses this development into the compact form of the sketch, while Daniel Deronda uses the leisurely pace of the Victorian multiplot novel to offer narratives of development. And if “Amos Barton” seems particularly enthusiastic about organic secularism’s merits, Daniel Deronda presents two characters who pose tremendous challenges for that model. Yet both share common traits that appear throughout Eliot’s fiction: a desire to take both organic notions of community and secular ideals of detachment seriously, and an interest in the formal qualities that embody variants of secularism. Throughout both works, religious remains a force that preserves and nourishes the world’s humanist values despite its own limitations. But as the title of Daniel Deronda’s last book indicates – “Fruit and Seed” – Eliot looks forward to a day where the fruit of secular values has blossomed, and the religion that nurtured it can wither away.
Browning and the Evolution of Belief: Holism and the Dramatic Monologue

What if it be the mission of that age,
My death will usher into life, to shake
This torpor of assurance from our creed,
Reintroduce the doubt discarded, bring
The formidable danger back, we drove
Long ago to the distance and the dark?

– Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book X.1851-1856

“If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty §115

So far I have followed Trollope and Eliot’s intersections with secularization theory, teasing out how both novelists imagine religion’s place – or absence – in a slowly modernizing world. While both explore secularization’s impact on individual characters, their attention largely focuses on the institutional changes in religion that differentiation brings. But as Steve Bruce argues, secularization theory posits a link between differentiation and growing skepticism; secularization encompasses “involves the place of religion in the social system, the social standings of religious institutions, and individual beliefs and behaviour” (3). At this point, I will move to explore this third aspect of secularization: what Bruce calls “the individual response to differentiation, societalization and pluralism” (19). And this focus leads back to aspects of
Victorian religion that scholars have long studied: doubt and skepticism. The social upheaval produced by secularization radically transforms the religious landscape and creates a space for skepticism, agnosticism, or atheism. As many modes of thought lose their traditional connection to religion and become distinct social systems – law, science, the market economy, and art among them – it becomes possible for religion to seem inconsequential or irrelevant. Not surprisingly, the Victorians respond to their highly differentiated world through intense questioning and arguing over whether traditional religious belief remains viable. And this has led to a long tradition of scholarship that emphasizes the skeptical side of nineteenth-century literature, calling our attention to writers who watched the Arnoldian Sea of Faith recede.

Many scholars, responding to this emergence of agnosticism and doubt, have argued that Victorian literature is skeptical at its core. Isobel Armstrong’s concept of the “double poem” in her landmark *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*, for instance, argues that skepticism can be found in the very fabric of nineteenth-century poems. In a polemic against reductive readings of Victorian poetry, Armstrong argues that we should read these texts as part of an “endless struggle and contention, struggle with a changing project, struggle with the play of ambiguity and contradiction” (10). Armstrong’s double poem affirms and questions at once; it acknowledges the expressive power of lyric poetry even as it raises questions about the context and foundations of that lyric voice. Armstrong’s description of the double poem is particularly compelling and remains influential – it is often proclaimed in contemporary scholarship as “the most general and the most trenchant” (Loesberg 872) way to understand Victorian poetry – but her theory also continues a long line of scholarship that points to the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguity in nineteenth-century verse. We can see anticipations of the double poem in Robert
Langbaum’s assertion that the dramatic monologue simultaneously compels readers to balance “sympathy and judgment” (96), for instance. Both accounts of Victorian poetry insist on the simultaneous presence of argument and counterargument, thesis and antithesis, identity and difference. Erik Gray neatly summarizes this long trend in Victorian studies: “Whether the Victorian poem is said to be working against itself (the ‘double poem’), or struggling against its Romantic precursors, or inviting a divided response (sympathy vs. judgment), it is consistently seen as a work in crisis” (10). This reading, as a general description of nineteenth-century poetry, is quite defensible, and it can be explained through the secularization paradigm. As modernization scrambles religion’s place in Victorian religion, poetry finds room for newly awakened skeptical impulses.

To explore this link between secularization and poetic skepticism, I turn to Robert Browning. His poetry, particularly his dramatic monologues, is a sustained meditation on the possibilities of religious faith. And Armstrong’s double poem is an excellent place to begin. The concept deserves it fame; it has proven its value for helping us understand Victorian literature. Armstrong is right to argue that Victorian poetry juxtaposes affirmation and skepticism, faith and doubt. Even better, she warns us about replacing one simplistic reading of Victorian poetry with another, one that falsely resolves a multitude of perspectives into a “simple dialogue or dialectic form in which the opposition between two terms is fixed and settled” (14). Unfortunately, Browning’s monologues are often read just according to this simplistic binary model, a form of “dialogism” that is only marginally better than the simplistic readings the double poem attacks. If, as Armstrong notes, the double poem is a “deeply sceptical form” (13), it can be tempting to read Victorian poetry as a simple choice between a dogmatic assertion and the sweeping
skepticism that undercuts it. This model of Browning’s monologues both predates and succeeds Armstrong’s own work, often in some of the most influential work in Victorian studies; hence we have Robert Langbaum arguing that The Ring and the Book “derives its meaning from the relativist ethos predominant in Western culture since the Enlightenment” (109) and J. Hillis Miller, in The Disappearance of God, claiming that Browning’s poetry comes from a “historicist” perspective that “assumes that all points of view are true” (107). As Adam Roberts rightly puts it, Browning scholarship has consistently emphasized the skeptical side of the dramatic monologue, the “hermeneutic and epistemological aporias” (159) that knowledge encounters. This should not cause us to dismiss this scholarship – these scholars have all written powerful interpretations of Browning that have deserved their prominence – but they consistently tend to oppose naive assertion to thoroughgoing skepticism. This sort of skepticism, as Amanda Anderson has argued in The Powers of Distance, is actually a “frustrated idealism” (32), a dissatisfied (and unsatisfying) response that insists belief must be “pure or absolute” (32) to count at all. Consequently, belief becomes nothing more than skepticism’s straight man, endlessly falling into its rival’s traps.

In this model’s place, I propose a different account: one that examines how belief adapts to the challenges of a differentiated world where previously unquestioned beliefs cannot be taken for granted. Browning’s monologues do not posit absurd beliefs only to knock them down; instead, they are tentative explorations of what parts of faith remain when confronted with severe challenges. We must understand Browning’s poems as “double poems” in Armstrong’s most

---

16 It must be said that the term “double poem” is unfortunate here; it implies a simple opposition that Armstrong rightly finds less useful for understanding Victorian poetry.
expansive sense; their “doubleness” is not a movement from naive, confident assertion to devastating skepticism. Instead, Browning’s dramatic monologues explore belief as a holistic system, not a collection of isolated, atomistic thoughts. His poetry examines how belief and skepticism work side by side in different frameworks of belief, instead of arguing that skepticism dissolves whatever belief it encounters. The dramatic monologue, then, requires the reader to move back and forth from a distancing perspective – one in which the reader must critique or suspend their religious or ethical commitments – to an engaged stance that relies upon those very commitments. And the speakers of these monologues undergo a similar process, balancing faith and doubt, skepticism and belief. The form, in Browning’s hands, becomes a tool to celebrate self-awareness and critical detachment while avoiding radical skepticism. Browning’s monologues epitomize Armstrong’s double poem: they present a complex mixture of doubt, belief, skepticism, and certainty, consistently modifying belief but never wholly undermining it (and, indeed, showing that any “pure” skepticism is impossible). I will explore this provisional, holistic sense of belief at work in three shorter Browning monologues – “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” “An Epistle of Karshish ...,” and “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” – and a remarkable, understudied long poem, Fifine at the Fair. As Browning’s poetic career develops, his work becomes more and more interested in exploring the connections between faith and doubt, rather than being satisfied with attacking naive forms of certainty. Consequently, Browning’s poetry emerges as a subtle account of religion’s fate in modernity; it explores how belief reshapes itself according to new discoveries and changes.

*
In the readings that follow, I show how Browning explores ways for belief to survive in a secularizing world. His poems present speakers who work through issues of skepticism, doubt, and moral evolution, showing how belief subtly changes in response to difficulties – and, by extension, modeling religion’s future as it faced the challenges of modernity. Nevertheless, Browning is often read as a poet whose work is aggressively skeptical rather than curious about how belief reconfigures itself in the face of doubt. Part of this tendency derives from the impact of deconstruction on Browning studies. Whatever the merits of this work, (and much of the best scholarship on Browning, such as the work of Isobel Armstrong and Herbert Tucker, has been heavily influenced by deconstruction), it tends to force Browning’s poetry into simple binaries that can be undermined. But since Browning’s work is less interested in dogmatic belief and more interested in tentative belief, deconstruction’s approach to Browning often “discovers” binaries that were never present in the poems to begin with. Alongside this critical tendency, however, is a simpler problem: literary history has focused on the Browning monologues that seem most easily interpreted through a deconstructive lens, such as “My Last Duchess” or “Porphyria’s Lover,” instead of the subtler and less skeptical poems that form the bulk of his poetry. As a result, these poems, atypical in the Browning corpus, are often thought of as prototypical dramatic monologues rather than exceptions to the rule. Through a combination of critical interest in a skeptical account of belief, and a reading of the Browning poetic corpus that’s heavily slanted toward his shorter and simpler monologues, Browning’s monologues often appear much more skeptical than they actually are.

In order to correct this distorted view, this chapter takes several different steps: looking at Browning’s biography for more insight into his views on religion, revisiting the theoretical
assumptions underpinning terms like “skepticism” and “doubt,” and venturing into the less-mapped terrain in the Browning corpus. I will begin by turning to his letters and his “Essay on Shelley.” Browning’s letters and essays, of course, cannot be read as an infallible guide to his poetry – and since the dramatic monologue often blurs the line between character and author, no biographical account can solve these textual problems. Even so, Browning’s letters and essays remain interesting for a quality that appears throughout his poetry: a refusal to treat belief and doubt as a simple binary. He writes to Elizabeth Barrett, for instance, that religious faith could have been made patently obvious – it could have “revealed the articles of belief as certainly as that condition, for instance, by which we breathe so many times in a minute to support life” (Major Works 653). But, Browning argues, that would have taken away the virtues of belief. Faith, we are told, only becomes valuable when it wrestles with doubt. “There is no reward proposed for the feat of breathing” (653), Browning dryly notes, because it is so easy to do. Faith has no merit, likewise, if it is simply “passive obedience and implicit submission of will and intellect” (653). As a result, Browning argues that it would be wrong to circumvent this struggle and abandon one’s critical faculties to an “infallible church, or private judgment of another” (654). This need for skepticism and faith, careful judgment and belief does not just apply to religion; he declares that “all our life is some form of religion, and all our action some belief” (654). Belief, in this reading, is both desirable and impossible to avoid. All human activity reveals the commitments and beliefs that drive it. But it is not something to be followed blindly. Browning argues that the challenge, and hope, of belief is this continual movement back and forth between commitment and self-questioning, eventually moving toward a fuller (if still incomplete or partial) understanding of the world.
The context of this letter is particularly interesting. Browning has a personal motive for these thoughts about belief and authority. He is responding in a moment of personal crisis—Elizabeth has written about her father’s desire to forbid their marriage. The “absolute no-reason” (653) that comes with blind obedience is, Browning makes clear, the sort of unquestioning faith that would require her to defer endlessly to the whims of a parent. Instead, he recommends a process of constant questioning and testing, advising Elizabeth to “examine the whole matter in dispute by every light which can be put in requisition” (654). Browning is, in effect, asking Elizabeth to read her own life as one should read his poetry—constantly attuned to the partial truths, limited perspectives, and outright errors in any perspective, in the hopes of coming to a better, more rational sort of belief. Skepticism and doubt are not challenges to certainty, but tools for refining one’s faith. Elizabeth Barrett is unable to avoid making a choice of some kind; belief, in other words, is indispensable, although disastrous if turned into blind, irrational dogmatism. Whatever the merits of this argument in Browning’s particular situation (it’s certainly a little self-serving) it’s worth noting two major features that will recur in his poetry: a very broad notion of belief that includes, but goes beyond, religious faith; and a refusal to shelter belief from the challenges of doubt. Life, in Browning’s letters and poems, is a process of refining faith; it is, to use a phrase from his “Old Pictures in Florence,” “a life-long toil till our lump be leaven” (129).

We see this maneuver—juxtaposing belief and doubt to create a productive tension—throughout Browning’s life. Almost twenty years after his letter to Elizabeth Barrett, Browning made similar statements on doubt and belief to his friend Julia Wedgwood. He recounts hearing a friend read Cardinal Newman’s declaration of total certainty in the existence of God—a
certainty that Newman compares to his belief in his own existence. Browning, not impressed with this claim, pulls no punches in his criticism. He announces that Newman “deceives himself and that no sane man has ever had, with mathematical exactness, equal conviction on those two points” (697). And Browning is not just rejecting the epistemological claim that knowledge of God can ever be this certain. He argues that the “practical effects of belief” (697) support his contention that belief can never be certain. “I can see nothing that comes from absolute contact, so to speak, between man and God,” he claims, “but everything in all variety from the greater or less distance between the two” (697). Whatever the merits of belief in general, for Browning, certain belief in God is both impossible and undesirable. Anyone claiming to possess certain knowledge of God’s existence is either exaggerating or abandoning rationality.

But not all belief is naive or overconfident. As a Christian himself, Browning has no interest in letting doubt and skepticism corrode all religious belief. The “Essay on Shelley” is perhaps the clearest statement of this continued investment in Christianity. He claims – implausibly – that “had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians” (Major Works 587). (Later in life, Browning would repudiate this confidence; he writes in 1870 that his view of Shelley was the product of “pure ignorance ... according to the testimony of untruthful friends” (726).) In a strategy for making Shelley’s atheism respectable for Christian readers, Browning gives belief greater weight than skepticism. He states that “in religion, one earnest and unextorted assertion of belief should outweigh, as a matter of testimony, many assertions of unbelief” (587). But even here, Browning does not espouse a naive or dogmatic sort of Christianity; he rejects theological sophistry, calling it “clamouring on doctrine for an especial solution of difficulties which are referable to the general problem of the
universe” (586). His brand of Christianity is comfortable with problems and doubt; Browning does not need to eradicate skepticism to preserve a naive faith. Consequently, his sort of belief is much more modest and accommodating – there are no crude binaries of faith and doubt in his religious views. Since Browning does not insist on certainty, he can incorporate skepticism with ease and turn it into a productive force. Religious belief (and existence in general) is part of a “life of probation” (653) in which seeking truth must be accomplished through “partial indulgence, the proper exercise of one’s faculties” (653). This life of probation, one that insists on constantly testing every possible belief, is part of Browning’s faith in “the sanctity of perpetual effort” (Gray 124), and its ability to channel doubt into stronger, more secure belief.

The plainest statement of these arguments in Browning’s poetry, Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, fleshes out the ideas of these letters. Easter-Day begins with the plaintive “How very hard it is to be / A Christian!” (1-2), voicing a challenge that will preoccupy Browning throughout the poem: how do you believe when troubled by doubt? One hypothetical response, he tells us, is that belief relies upon doubt in order to work at all: “You must mix some uncertainty / With faith, if you would have faith be” (71-2). But Browning, initially at least, finds this unsatisfying. What if, he asks the content Christian, “after all we should mistake, / and so renounce life for the sake / Of death and nothing else” (295-7)? Doubt returns – and it never really leaves. Browning ends the poem determined to be a Christian, but still aware of its difficulties; he still has doubts about whether his faith holds true. But he lives on, having decided on a clear course of action: to “go through the world, try, prove, reject” (1019). His faith will never remain free from doubt or skepticism, but it doesn’t need to. Christ, he finally decides, provides “mercy every way” (1039), allowing him to remain a faithful Christian even as
he questions his way through the world. Hence Browning holds that faith requires the believer to actively work through belief and the intellectual challenges it faces. Ironically, Browning’s clarity in *Easter-Day* makes his theological beliefs clear at the expense of the poem; since we do not distinguish between speaker and implied author as we do in the monologues, it is all too easy to accept his statements without trying, proving, or rejecting them. The formal innovations accompanying Browning’s monologues, on the other hand, reinforce his theological belief in obscurity and difficulty.

Browning’s letters and essays, then, advance a defense of belief that acknowledges doubt. He argues that belief and skepticism are not opposing factors; rather, thoughtful belief constantly seeks out its limitations and problems. Why, then, are his monologues often read as skeptical attacks on belief and not portraits of slowly evolving belief, faith that withstands and even uses doubt to strengthen itself? The problem, I argue, is not biographical but epistemological. The desire to form a sharp binary between unshakable, dogmatic belief and its skeptical rival comes from a simplified view of epistemology that insists on either certainty or pure skepticism – as Amanda Anderson puts it, it’s “all or nothing” (32). And this binary impoverishes our view of Browning’s poetry in two ways: it oversimplifies the careful, complex process of doubt and belief into naive confidence and corrosive skepticism, and it directs our attention away from the particular contexts and problems of each monologue in favor of a reductive schema. But if this sort of epistemology appears natural or necessary, Browning’s poetry will be read accordingly. In order to better understand how these dramatic monologues react to skepticism, I will briefly re-examine the skepticism that underpins the reductive approach to his work.
The best way to escape these problems is to follow Anderson’s “all or nothing” argument to its logical conclusion. For radical skepticism seems possible, even natural, if we require belief and knowledge to clear an improbably high bar. This sort of epistemological idealism leads, as Charles Taylor puts it, to a conviction that beliefs must have “a kind of total self-transparent clarity” (“Overcoming Epistemology” 18) in order to work at all. And since isolated beliefs rarely (if ever) possess this sort of stability, radical skepticism seems like the only answer. But what this perspective misses is the possibility of a network of beliefs, preconceptions, assumptions, and behaviors, many of which are open to question. No single belief or fact is a foundation upon which everything else rests; instead, we all possess a system of beliefs that are more or less coherent at any given time. Many philosophers have proposed ways of understanding this path between transparent certainty and pure skepticism. Wittgenstein, for instance, draws an analogy in On Certainty between our system of thoughts and beliefs and a riverbed, which consists of beliefs that seem largely or mostly certain: “hard rock ... subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one ... sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away or deposited” (§99). Other beliefs, Wittgenstein argues, act as the water carried along that river-bed; these are propositions that are “not hardened but fluid” (§96). And there is “not a sharp division” (§97) between each; beliefs that were once questioned but seem increasingly sound can harden and become part of the river-bed, while previously unquestioned assertions that seem increasingly dubious can soften and join the stream of propositions we explicitly question. This analogy has two major implications I’d like to focus on here. First, any particular belief or statement is in principle open to challenge (even if, as in the “hard rock” of Wittgenstein’s analogy, some beliefs are so deeply embedded in how we perceive the world that
we would never think of questioning them). And secondly, against the skeptical implications of the first claim, there is no single “belief” upon which all of our other beliefs rest. What we believe, in other words, “is not a single proposition” but “a whole system of propositions” (§141).

Other major philosophers have offered similar arguments about knowledge and belief, arguing that we understand the world as a system of beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions. When a statement or belief becomes subject to questioning or doubt, that doubt takes place against a backdrop of knowledge and belief that remains taken for granted. John Searle argues that the meaning of any statement, even its literal meaning, always presumes “a set of background assumptions about the contexts in which the sentence could be appropriately uttered” (117). Habermas, borrowing a term from Edmund Husserl, introduces the concept of the lifeworld as a set of “more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions” which, in any discussion, are “presupposed by participants as unproblematic” (1.70). Argument or discussion occurs against these background convictions. (As in Wittgenstein’s riverbed, any background presupposition or belief can become a target of explicit discussion – but not all of the background assumptions can be examined or questioned at once.) This alternate philosophical tradition makes it clear that belief and skepticism need not be treated as polar opposites, as many readings of the dramatic monologue tend to do. And it points out the error in insisting on the sharp contrast between a simple, unproblematic claim from the speaker with the devastating, ironic skepticism that the poem gradually reveals. Idealism and skepticism, certainty and relativism: in these accounts of epistemology, these pairs are two sides of the same counterfeit coin. Instead, belief and skepticism are found side by side; doubt modifies belief, and belief
supplies the foundation for any particular form of doubt. The dramatic monologue, in Browning’s hands, works out this subtler epistemology in poetic form. It examines how sets of statements and beliefs change with the arrival of new information or beliefs, not how a single belief lives or dies.

This is not to say that Browning becomes a relativist, refusing to reject any set of beliefs as invalid. His dramatic monologues, as Andrew H. Miller argues, work through the issue of “moral perfectionism” (109), constantly challenging belief in order to improve it. Many of Browning’s monologues hold that particular beliefs are wrong (extreme Calvinism, radical egoism, and so on). He simply understands that individual beliefs are not brought out for confirmation or rejection on their own; they form part of a system of beliefs which adapt to new information or changing beliefs over time. As W. V. O. Quine argues in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” it is erroneous to believe that a “statement, taken in isolation from its fellows, can admit of confirmation or infirmation at all” (38). Instead, since all propositions refer back to a large system of thought and ideas, “any statement can be held true come what may” but “no statement is immune to revision” (40). Nevertheless, there are “epistemologically superior” (41) accounts of the world, systems of belief and knowledge that deal better with the “flux of experience” (41). Browning approaches knowledge and doubt in this subtler way, one that makes the sort of devastating skepticism directed at atomistic beliefs seem very much beside the point. And I hope to demonstrate here that Browning’s monologues are richer and more compelling when read, not as a recurring binary where belief falls apart under mild scrutiny, but as complex examinations of particular statements and doubts within a historical context and background of beliefs. Browning, in other words, is less interested in undermining individual
beliefs or attitudes than in exploring how particular doubts or beliefs exist within a network of views that a particular speaker holds. He presents us with speakers whose steadfast commitment to one set of beliefs creates interesting distortions elsewhere in their thought (Agricola, Karshish) and speakers who perceive subtle relationships between faith and doubt even as they are blind to errors in their own lives (Bishop Blougram and Don Juan of Fifine at the Fair). Browning’s monologues – or the double poem itself – are richer, more subtle, when read as an exploration of systems of belief and doubt.

As with Trollope and Eliot, though, Browning faces the challenge of translating this stance toward religion into literary form. He must develop a form that helps explore the connections between faith and doubt, rather than baldly presenting it as Christmas Eve and Easter-Day does. And he faces the same question as many writers working in an increasingly differentiated world: does poetry remain a viable tool for exploring philosophical and theological meaning, or did it obtain its increasing autonomy by surrendering much of its ability to explore the world outside art? And even if nothing technically prevents the poet from addressing whatever subject he or she likes, is there a means for successfully integrating these problems of belief into the poetry? The same crisis that produces differentiation and doubt, in other words, is a crisis that makes art increasingly skeptical about its own potential for reaching outside its own limits into social spheres that it does not occupy. If literature’s “poetic, world-disclosing function” increases to the degree that it “escapes the structural constraints and communicative functions of everyday life” (Habermas 204), then a tension emerges between the requirements of poetry and the potential for understanding how systems of belief reshape themselves. Even if we assume that art is not completely autonomous but only partially differentiated from the world
around it, as I have suggested, its distinction from other modes of thought still proves to be a challenge for a poet who wants to explore belief and skepticism. Browning must develop a form of poetry that can accommodate sustained thought about religious doubt without losing its effectiveness as poetry. His monologues address the problems of modernity with tools reshaped by it.\(^{17}\)

In part, Browning translates his theological interest in doubt into style – the “notorious difficulty, compressed syntax, and profusion” (Gray 124) of his work. But his most fundamental innovation occurs on the level of genre. In his hands, the dramatic monologue becomes a powerful method for examining modernity while respecting art’s differentiated place. It builds on the legacy of lyric poetry while extending its reach. As W. David Shaw’s recent study of the monologue argues, the dramatic monologue emerges from Romantic lyric poetry, particularly Coleridge’s conversation poems. And the form never loses sight of its home; in Shaw’s words, the dramatic monologue “tilts seductively in the direction of lyric poetry” (13). This continued relationship to the lyric helps the dramatic monologue meet the constraints of modernity and autonomy. For the lyric, perhaps more than any other genre of Romantic or post-Romantic poetry, seems to fit comfortably into a strictly differentiated literary sphere. Critics largely agree that the lyric is the genre that most successfully resists the social by focusing on subjective personal experience; it is, as E. Warwick Slinn refers to it, “the least mimetic or social of poetic forms” (27). Its emphasis on the subjective, on “the poet’s own experiences and emotions” (Byron 35), seems to fit quite well with a theory of differentiation that defines

---

\(^{17}\) For an interesting discussion of Browning’s relationship to Victorian aesthetics, see E. Warwick Slinn’s argument in his *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique*, which reads “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” as “Browning’s challenge to the exclusion of the political from aesthetic theory” (54).
“autonomous art” as a sphere focused on “authenticity or beauty” (Habermas 1.177), designed to emphasize “experiences in dealing with inner nature” (Habermas 1.161). And while Habermas’s conception of differentiated art is too restrictive, as I have argued, the Romantic lyric fits these restrictions more comfortably than most genres. Even the most stringent theory of differentiation (as we see in Habermas here) can easily accommodate the lyric voice. It seems to resist being moving outside a limited sphere of personal expression; Adorno’s study of the lyric, for instance, refers to it as “a sphere of expression whose very essence lies in defying the power of social organization” (56). Consequently, by building this new genre on a solid foundation, Browning grounds his poetry in a tradition suited for an increasingly differentiated world. The lyric can hardly be accused of overstepping literature’s boundaries.

But a simple formal device transforms the lyric into the dramatic monologue: a “speaker, not to be confused with the poet” (Shaw 12). This move transforms the genre – it opens the lyric to “a more objectively perceived world” (Byron 35). By calling our attention to how the voice of the poem differs from the author behind it, the dramatic monologue makes the utterances of that lyric voice available for much more explicit social commentary and criticism. In fact, Slinn claims that “dramatic monologues are potentially the most mimetic form of poetry (even more than narratives) in their ability to reproduce verbal social behavior, but, like lyrics, they also foreground constitutive language through intensive poetic devices” (28). In Slinn’s words, “through dramatizing speech acts and thereby recontextualizing them,” the dramatic monologue (and, in his account, other forms of poetry as well) “may expose the matrix and its

18 Of course, as Adorno goes on to demonstrate, the lyric does not exclude social critique, merely embeds it within the personal and subjective. The dramatic monologue helps excavate the social dimension buried in the lyric.
practices of an enabling cultural condition” (26). Readers of the dramatic monologue must decipher and critique the truth of the speaker’s claims, the values he or she expresses, and the sincerity of his or her statements. The dramatic monologue, in other words, drags the lyric out from the realm of autonomous art and forces it into other social spheres; it is part of what Gray calls “the Victorian ironizing of Romantic lyrics” (7). It cannot be read properly without paying attention to the social contexts that shape and inform the individual speaker’s beliefs, claims, and arguments. Not coincidentally, almost all the classic examples of the dramatic monologue – “My Last Duchess,” “Fra Lippo Lippi,” “Andrea Del Sarto,” and so on – place their speaker in contexts other than Victorian England. The dramatic monologue, then, becomes an ideal tool for expanding the scope of subjects poetry can study without compromising its safely differentiated place in the world. It shows how social context – the background assumptions and beliefs that govern any individual utterance – permeate even the most personal and subjective thoughts.

The dramatic monologue, in Browning’s hands, becomes the perfect literary form for exploring how belief and skepticism work together to shape a system of thought.19 The dramatic monologue, amplifying a characteristic of poetry in general, delights in ambiguity. It begins with a speaker whose utterance makes sense only within a particular context, purpose, audience, and historical moment. To this foundation it adds the context and beliefs of an implied author, one who can be more or less inclined to share the mental framework of the poem’s speaker. And, of course, the reader brings contexts, presumptions, opinions, and background knowledge of his or her own. Interpreting the dramatic monologue forces us to consider all three of these factors

---

19 We can now see why Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, important as it is for understanding Browning’s religious beliefs, has never been considered one of his major works. That poem, unlike the dramatic monologues, does not require the same judicious assessment of belief and doubt that, Browning argues, a Christian must constantly apply to the world.
when making sense of, or judging, the monologuist. Hence the movement back and forth between sympathy and judgment, as Robert Langbaum points out, is crucial for understanding the poems; readers are forced to probe the merits and defects in three different mental frameworks. The dramatic monologue requires readers to compare all three sets of beliefs, without letting any single perspective gain a decisive upper hand. Meaning in the poems, as Herbert Tucker puts it, is not found “in the poem, as an object one stands and pokes at, but through the poem, as a method or series of signs that one actively traverses” (12).

Browning’s dramatic monologues also place the reader in the same place as its characters, dealing with an enormous number of beliefs and a multiplying set of challenges to those beliefs. At the same time, as the dramatic monologue requires readers to question, doubt, and challenge the views of a speaker, it also balances that skepticism with certain interpretations of the text that are not put into question at all. It is here that Wittgenstein’s claims about certainty – that, indeed, “the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (§115) – become particularly relevant. Even if skepticism is the order of the day, no interesting interpretation of a dramatic monologue can doubt everything the speaker says. If we question the Duke of Ferrara’s claims about his “last duchess” and her “flirtations,” for instance, we still base our suspicion on a set of other beliefs (in the duke’s paranoia, the duchess’s innocence, and so on) that make the suspicion possible at all. To return to Wittgenstein’s metaphor of the river-bed, even if no individual claim about a monologue is immune from scrutiny, any interpretation of the monologue or claim about the speaker’s unreliability depends on accepting certain beliefs about the poem as given. Again, Herbert Tucker puts the problem nicely: “the poet in Browning cares as little for untrammeled liberty as for perfect bondage” (14). And the dramatic monologue is a perfect vehicle for
avoiding each extreme – although the layers of voices and need to discover the context of the poem make it very difficult to interpret confidently, no interpretation of the poems can succeed without basing its claims on some reliable ground.

The challenge of reading Browning’s poetry matches the challenge faced by many of Browning’s speakers: discovering what to believe and what to doubt. Readers work through doubt in order to arrive at a better set of beliefs and presumptions; the speakers with the most insightful thoughts on religion undergo the same process, proving that their belief is both flexible and sophisticated. To dramatize this problem, Browning continually focuses on moments when speakers come face to face with new information or beliefs, ideas that do not comfortably fit into their conceptions of the world. His speakers then take one of two paths: they either remain confident in their errors, or they revisit old assumptions and modifying previous beliefs.

Meanwhile, readers of the dramatic monologue do the same thing, gradually reshaping their assumptions about the speaker and the world of the poem in accordance with new information that comes their way. For Browning, then, becoming a good reader of the dramatic monologue means rising to the challenge that his speakers face. Since Browning argues that religious faith can survive secularization by honestly facing doubt and refining belief, his poetry trains its readers to undergo this difficult but rewarding process. The dramatic monologue thus solves a number of different problems: it grounds itself in relatively autonomous art while opening itself up to wider social contexts, it presents speakers who tackle subjects of faith and doubt, and it teaches the attentive reader how to reshape their systems of belief without falling into naive certainty or pure skepticism.

*
Of course, part of caustic skepticism’s appeal lies in the fact that there are indeed naive beliefs out there. And Browning’s monologues do occasionally venture in this direction, when they examine speakers who prove disastrously unwilling to question themselves. The best example in his work of religious certainty taken to disastrous extremes is “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” whose original grouping in the “Madhouse Cells” poems (along with “Porphyria’s Lover”) indicates that, for Browning, some forms of religious belief are so absurd as to border insanity. This poem forms an ideal starting point for our reading, because it seems to be a case where the strict belief/skepticism binary perfectly accounts for the problems with the monologuists’s mind. Agricola, the speaker of the poem, really is as certain in his belief as the polarizing reading of the double poem suggests. He opens the poem with a confident declaration that heaven is clearly visible to him – he looks “right through its gorgeous roof” (2). And he collapses his purpose and objective into a description of what he is actually doing, following the line “For I intend to get to God” (6) with “For ‘tis to God I speed so fast” (7). For Agricola, intention blurs into action; there is no gap, either in his mind or on the page, between what he wishes to do and what he does. His confidence in predestination makes him certain that every single aspect of life – including the “minutest” (18) of circumstances – has been decided by God at the beginning of time, “ere he fashioned star or sun” (20). Agricola’s salvation, he believes, is completely assured. Even the form of his verse reinforces his serene confidence. Although the poem is not printed in stanza form, every five lines end with a line that concludes with a punctuation mark that brackets off those thoughts from the ones to follow, as though the topic of that discrete bit of poetry has now been closed. The rhyme scheme reinforces this sense of
closely, as the fifth line interrupts the ABAB pattern with a final B rhyme, emphatically ending that portion of Agricola’s thought.

Agricola’s unshakeable confidence is a problem for Langbaum’s claim that the reader of the dramatic monologue oscillates between sympathy and judgment – it seems very difficult to find much to sympathize with here. Even without the title “Madhouse Cells” tipping Browning’s hand, Agricola’s views seem deeply unattractive. Part of the problem is his comfort with the less attractive side of predestination; Agricola is not only happy to imagine his fate, he cheerfully imagines those on “hell’s fierce bed” (44) whose best efforts were “undone / Before God fashioned star and sun” (55). The damned, Agricola claims, have been set aside for destruction since the beginning of time. Those who are destined for salvation can consume the “mingled venoms” (35) of “hideous sins” (34) without any harm, while sinners have no hope no matter what they do; they are compared to a “poisoned-gourd” (32) that turns “sweet dews” (38) to contamination and ruin. Agricola does not use his theology as a license to behave however he pleases; the comments on his freedom to sin are phrased as hypotheticals, with the qualifying preface “could I” (33). But his assertion that he could do so, given his assured place in heaven, and his calm reflections on those doomed since birth, makes him a deeply unattractive speaker. Even Calvinist readers might hesitate at Agricola’s claim that God in fact needs an object – “content” (30) – to love. His confidence in his place in the world, and his utter unwillingness to take up other positions, rightly makes the reader suspicious of the conclusions he draws.

So far we have followed a reading of the double poem that seems to posit the sort of naive certainty a skeptical reading will demolish. And critics are certainly right to find in “Johannes Agricola” a perverse version of Christianity that is close to madness; as Armstrong
puts it, “Agricola’s mind creates God in his own image of despotism” (151). It is, as she says, a vivid demonstration of the “disreputable purposes” (150) fictions or beliefs can lead to. And this is the crucial difference between Agricola and Browning’s more sophisticated speakers. Agricola, unlike some of the shrewder speakers Browning presents, has no real thoughts about the world aside from his calm belief in double predestination. Consequently, his picture of the world is not particularly fleshed out. Consider again the first five lines of the poem:

There’s heaven above, and night by night
I look right through its gorgeous roof;
No suns and moons though e’er so bright
Avail to stop me; splendour-proof
I keep the broods of stars aloof: (1-5)

Agricola’s aim to reach God requires him to look “through” (2) the particular objects in the sky. Both his sight and his theology are based on a naive sort of transparency, as Agricola is confident that God has revealed truth to him with perfect clarity. He claims to understand God without the slightest bit of interference from empirical reality in the observable universe. In fact, he conceives of the “suns and moons” (3) as obstacles, even ones with a sort of will to prevent his ascent to heaven. Although Agricola, confident in his own salvation, would not believe himself endangered by these obstacles, the beautiful bodies of the sky remain a trap – “shoals” (9) on which lesser souls are ruined. He acknowledges the beauty of the world – “gorgeous roof” (2), “splendour-proof” (4), “dazzling glory” (9) – but he seems determined to regard beauty as superfluous to his mission and ruinous to others. But he is not just ignoring the beauty of these objects, but their light, and hence their symbolic connection to knowledge and
awareness of the world. Agricola’s contemptuous use of the word “broods” (5) to describe the stars indicates his tendency to lump unique objects from the world into one undifferentiated mass. And the connection of the term “broods” to thought and “mental contemplation” (OED) makes his antipathy to thinking clear. Agricola has no use for beauty or knowledge, except for his certain “knowledge” of his salvation. By rejecting any knowledge except for his belief in his own holiness, Agricola can maintain a certainty that would never survive confrontations with knowledge of the world or reasonable doubt. Certainty, Browning suggests, thrives on ignorance.

This relationship between certainty and ignorance in “Johannes Agricola” becomes even clearer as the poem progresses. In fact, Agricola makes this relationship explicit when he compares his flourishing to a tree, as both reach upward to the heavens. He thrives – “buds and blooms” (24) – like the tree. But, also like the tree, he has no knowledge or interest in why he succeeds, and for Agricola, this is an admirable feature. Just as the tree does not even seek “to know / The law by which it prospers so” (24-25), so too is Agricola utterly uncurious and unaware of the world in which he lives. His certainty in his salvation thrives on his determined ignorance. In the final five lines of the poem, Agricola makes his dependence on ignorance clear:

God, whom I praise; how could I praise,
If such as I might understand,
Make out and reckon on his ways,
And bargain for his love, and stand,
Paying a price, at his right hand? (56-60)
The references to bargaining and “paying a price” point to the virtuous damned, who Agricola imagines will attempt to earn their way into a salvation that they could never possess. It’s particularly revealing, though, that Agricola groups understanding and “reckoning” with a doomed attempt to bargain one’s way into heaven. Thinking about God or trying to comprehend theology is, for Agricola, utterly incompatible with his praise in God and his gratitude for the salvation in which he feels assured. Agricola’s belief system, in other words, only works thanks to a determined and overwhelming lack of knowledge – it is a deliberately thin system of belief. His confidence in predestination can only be maintained by remaining completely unaware of anything that could create problems for this foundational belief.

Agricola preserves his belief in double predestination by upholding it as the single unshakeable value upon which everything else rests. To return to the image of the river-bed and river outlined by Wittgenstein, Agricola’s system of beliefs has a single unshakable bedrock belief – his own ultimate destiny and the corresponding damnation of others – surrounded by an enormous amount of completely fluid belief that Agricola shows no interest in. He has made the rest of his system so vacuous that it effectively shields the only belief he has from challenge or scrutiny. This does not necessarily make him an easy target for a devastating skeptical attack. As Quine argues, “any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system” (40). Agricola, with almost no “system” at all beyond his own serene confidence in predestination, can easily make double predestination a statement that he refuses to reject. And his lack of knowledge makes it all the easier for him to hold to predestination as an unshakable truth. What I wish to argue is that this ignorance makes his certainty possible. His total indifference to learning about the natural world or the lives of those
he dismisses as damned leaves him serenely confident in his own fate. In short, he achieves his
certainty by surrendering any other thoughts or knowledge about the world. Agricola’s certainty
is a worthy target for demolition, but his real flaw is not belief in itself. It is that his belief can
only be preserved, unshaken, by surrounding itself with a protective layer of ignorance.

This reading of the poem might closely follow a simple certainty/skepticism binary, with
a qualification that it works only because of how “thin” Agricola’s system of beliefs is. But
Agricola is an easy target, and he does not have a typical character’s set of beliefs, presumptions,
or ideas. More interesting, I think, are the dramatic monologues where speakers advocate for
positions that come out of a thicker, more fully developed system of thoughts and contexts; when
these speakers have a larger number of beliefs about the world, and they are willing to
acknowledge doubt, contradictions, and skepticism, this binary reading of Browning’s poetry
falls apart. And here, I will argue, is where Browning’s interest in a tentative, provisional form
of belief becomes most clear. Some of the most fascinating monologues of Browning’s career
feature speakers whose perspective can neither be dismissed as fatally flawed not embraced
wholeheartedly. As a result, the reader cannot reject the speaker’s claims entirely, but must sift
through a collection of beliefs in order to determine what is true and false. These poems demand
a more careful, wary sort of reading, one that judges particular premises as flawed or valid only
by cautiously weighing their merits against a social context. (By contrast, think of the radical
lack of context in “Johannes Agricola in Meditation”; the speaker is literally and figuratively
isolated from the world around him.) Browning’s more challenging monologists, in other words,
force us to be holistic interpreters, reconstructing not just a single position but a network of
attitudes and beliefs. These sorts of dramatic monologues train us to look at where speakers go
wrong and what they get right, as we sort through their misconceptions and wisdom all at once. They teach the reader to do what Browning hopes religious believers do in a secularizing world: bravely wrestle with doubt in order to improve and refine the beliefs that they have.

To see this more complicated sort of belief and doubt in action, let’s turn to “An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician.” From the first few lines of the poem, it is apparent that Karshish is a substantially more cautious and modest speaker than Agricola (though, of course, it’s hard to imagine a speaker less modest than Agricola). He begins by identifying himself as “the picker-up of learning’s crumbs” (1), positioning himself as a mere scavenger of knowledge and education. In fact, he even qualifies the object of his scavenging; Karshish takes care to point out that he only gleans the remnants and fragments of knowledge. Learning in its entirety seems completely out of his reach. Despite the fact that he is a doctor, he refuses to speak of his medical accomplishments, instead describing himself as “not-incurious in God’s handiwork” (2). Karshish refuses to identify himself as knowledgeable or skilled in medicine, and does no more than concede that he is interested in the subject. The double negation of “not-incurious” further indicates his modesty and deference, as though declaring openly that he is interested in “God’s handiwork” is a presumptuous move he has no right to make. When it comes to the recipient of the letter, his teacher Abib, Karshish is more complimentary; he refers to him as “all-sagacious” (7) and credits him with “what poor skill I boast” (8). This claim amplifies Karshish’s modesty; by referring to this persistent self-denigration as “boasting,” he makes it clear how much there is to know about the world, even for its most informed inhabitants. It would be hard to imagine a monologuist more removed from the serene arrogance of Johannes Agricola. While Agricola proudly rejects
any knowledge of the world, claiming that it would just interfere with his path to heaven, Karshish embraces all the knowledge he can find and modestly downplays his (considerable) accomplishments. While Agricola is happy to claim total knowledge of the world’s eternal fate, Karshish refuses to claim any real skill or knowledge in his own career. And his references to medical details shortly after in the poem reveal that he knows far more about medicine than this modesty suggests; Karshish is able, for instance, to favorably compare salves – “Judea’s gum-tragacanth” (55) – to the inferior medicine of his homeland. While Agricola reveals his ignorance through his confidence, Karshish’s masks his wisdom with humility.

But knowledgeable as Karshish is about medicine, the “Epistle” focuses on an encounter with Christian doctrine that cannot fit into his medical framework. The bulk of the poem is a description of Lazarus, years after his miraculous return from the grave. Karshish can only understand his firm belief in resurrection – one Lazarus knows from his own life as well as his devout faith in Christ – by classifying it as “mania – subinduced / By epilepsy” (79-80). Karshish, encountering something completely outside his medical frame of thought, is unable to consider Lazarus anything but a clinical subject. He never considers the possibility of a non-medical explanation for Lazarus’s behavior, and he bluntly declares that Lazarus is “stark mad” (264) and completely unreliable about his belief. Since he interprets this startling news through his own experience, he cannot perceive the truth behind Lazarus’s account. He consistently refers to Christ (whose name is never mentioned in the poem, perhaps to defamiliarize the reader from familiar religious narratives) as a “physician” (100) or even, more startling, a “learned leech” (247). In one of the poem’s few humorous moments, Karshish, who understands the death of Christ as a “tumult” (248) where he was accused of rebellion and
wizardry, wryly refers to the crucifixion as an example of “our learning’s fate” (249): the natural outcome of the medical knowledge that, he presumes, led others to interpret Christ as a magician. (Here Browning presents layers of misreading: Karshish offers an account of the crucifixion, itself misinterpreting what happened, that accuses others of a misinterpretation of their own.) Given a framework that interprets everything as a medical phenomenon, Karshish proves unable to properly understand these events. His certainty in medicine’s explanatory powers, and his inability to consider alternative options, causes him to misread Lazarus entirely.

If the poem were this simple, it would be quite similar to “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” where the fun lies in spotting how a deluded narrator misses the point entirely. But Karshish is no Agricola, and his perceptions and beliefs are far more complex. For one, Karshish is not meant to be ridiculed; while Browning presents him as someone who misunderstands Christian doctrine, he is thoughtful and intelligent, not an overconfident fool. And Karshish never displays the preposterous certainty we see in Agricola. In fact, unlike Agricola, who prides himself on his ignorance, Karshish explicitly reflects on the epistemological problems that can lead to self-deception. Rather than simply dismissing Lazarus’s mania as inexplicable, Karshish develops an elaborate theory to explain why Lazarus believes something that seems so odd. With the “trance” (81) being cured “all at once” (85), Lazarus is left – physically – “whole and sound” (86). But, Karshish speculates, the sudden change leaves him open for a particularly bad sort of mental disturbance, since the “first conceit” (89) that enters his mind at this moment can gain an intractable hold on him. And Lazarus’s belief in his own resurrection, and the divinity of Christ, becomes a belief that his soul “hath gotten now so thoroughly by heart / That henceforth she will read or these or none” (95-96). Lazarus’s “mania,” for Karshish, is not inexplicable, but
an undesirable reaction to a particularly good cure. This interpretation points to a reflective quality in Karshish: he is not simply interested in declaring beliefs right or wrong. Instead, he wants to explain how one belief rests upon another, how a system of beliefs – however alien – holds together.

Karshish’s explanation of Lazarus’s faith foregrounds issues of knowledge and certainty. Lazarus’s belief in resurrection, Karshish insists, has been inscribed “on the wall” (90) of his mind. Other beliefs, propositions, inclinations, experiences, and so on also enter his mind, but none of them have the ability to “erase those fancy-scribbles” (94) that tell Lazarus to believe in his resurrection and the divinity of Christ. This image – a certain belief imprinted on the wall of the mind – argues for an understanding of human reason in which some unchallenged assumptions remain central for any thought that comes after it. Karshish does not fault Lazarus for believing in resurrection, though he rejects that claim as false; it is understandable that something imprinted on his mind so early would be impossible to escape. Here we have a belief that, for Lazarus, is indisputable. For Browning, though an item of faith and hence tied up with doubt, the belief in resurrection is also true; we thus have a moment where certainty is not allied with skepticism. It’s also worth noting that the soul, in Karshish’s analogy, is not the origin of belief or knowledge. The soul simply reads what has been inscribed on the walls of the mind, rather than discovering or writing it by itself. In this account of belief, some propositions do become certain knowledge, and those propositions often have mysterious origins. The problems of doubt and belief become central to Karshish’s reflection on the strange events that he has encountered. Even if he never rethinks the assumptions inscribed on his own mind’s walls, his
thoughts on belief and doubt are far more sophisticated than the naive certainty often thought to characterize the speaker of a dramatic monologue.

Thus we see Karshish, unlike Agricola, offering a sophisticated account of how belief and knowledge are inscribed in the mind. And Karshish’s account of Lazarus’s story – his attempt to make sense of something difficult to fit into his network of belief – is equally thoughtful. Karshish finds Lazarus to be an interesting case not because of his “mania” but because, despite his best efforts, something about Lazarus resists being easily assimilated to a clinical interpretation. Lazarus, he tells Abib, “eyes the world now like a child” (117). He does not understand the world according to the conventional “value in proportion of all things” (144); he is totally indifferent, for instance, to the looming threat of the Roman Empire. But, Karshish freely admits, Lazarus is not “apathetic” (226); he “loves both old and young, / able and weak” (227-8). While he is unable to think of Lazarus without assuming his beliefs to be false, he acknowledges that those beliefs have made him a particularly attractive and admirable person. In other words, Karshish can recognize the limitations on his own system of knowledge, pointing to specific features in Lazarus that make him reluctant to call him a lunatic. Though Karshish is ultimately unable to account for Lazarus’s belief in resurrection and the divinity of Christ as anything other than madness, he can understand that Lazarus poses a severe challenge to the medical framework that he uses to decipher the world. Only a detailed, thoughtful set of beliefs – the sort that Karshish has – can support these sustained reflections in response to a challenge.

Near the end of the poem, when Karshish openly discusses Christian theology for the first and only time, we can see him struggle with the idea that Lazarus’s story might demand a radical response. Ultimately, he never finds himself convinced by Lazarus; he tells Abib that the
“imputations” about the life and death of Christ “must be lies” (260). In fact, Karshish proves reluctant to even mention the idea of resurrection, cutting his description of Lazarus’s beliefs short – he says that Christ “died, with Lazarus by, for aught I know, / And yet was ...” (273-274).

It is almost as if Karshish finds the idea of resurrection so preposterous that it becomes literally unspeakable. He even interrupts this digression and reproaches himself for dwelling on “trivial matters” (278) like Lazarus’s “mania,” when there are far more important matters to relate – the discovery of medicinal herbs like “blue-flowering borage” (281), for instance. Ironically, for someone who critiques Lazarus’s inability to recognize the relative importance of events in the world, Karshish proves to be far worse, badly misreading the implications of Lazarus’s beliefs.

But despite his best efforts, Karshish is a sensitive interpreter of events, and he knows enough to know that Lazarus has genuinely shaken his system of thought. In a final postscript that shows his fascination with Lazarus has not faded, his ordinarily controlled tone becomes, for once, a genuine outburst: “The very God! think, Abib; dost though think?” (304). He adds a detailed description of the Christian conception of God, indicating that he has been captivated by the doctrine even if he cannot believe it. The final line of the poem perfectly captures the balance between doubt and openness to new ideas; he once again calls Lazarus a “madman” (312), but his final words are inconclusive and not wholly dismissive: “it is strange” (312).

“An Epistle of Karshish” thus challenges the idea that Browning’s dramatic monologues are primarily interested in skepticism. The poem is not an attack on Christian doctrine but a celebration of it. Nor is Karshish the sort of monologuist whose naive certainty gets exposed by a perceptive reading that undermines it. Karshish, as we have seen, is not certain at all; he proves quite open to startling new ideas, even if he is ultimately unable to fit them comfortably.
into his framework of beliefs. His background of knowledge, ideas, and beliefs has served him well through life, and Karshish is unable and unwilling to abandon them, but he is thoughtful and intelligent enough to know when something poses real problems for the medical framework that guides and shapes his perception of the world. His interpretation of Lazarus’s story, for a Christian like Browning, may fall short, but Karshish is not treated as a fool or a deluded, overconfident subject like Johannes Agricola. He is an honorable and perceptive monologuist who reexamines some of his beliefs – though not all – in the light of new, strange information. His approach to belief and doubt might best be described by Charles Taylor’s claim in A Secular Age that “we are in fact all acting, thinking, and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand ... At the same time, no background leaves us utterly without room for movement and change” (387). Browning uses the dramatic monologue here to explore how that interplay of background belief and new experience allows Karshish to probe truth and doubt, certainty and skepticism alike. Even as he proves unable to leap out of the scientific, non-Christian background that shapes his thought, Karshish demonstrates the intellectual virtues of uncertainty.

If “An Epistle of Karshish” moves far away from the model of the naive speaker demolished by skepticism, “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” combines faith, knowledge, doubt, and cynicism in a way that defeats any crude readings of the speaker. The subject of the poem is explicitly belief and doubt – the titular “apology” is the bishop’s defense of his (at times remarkably candid) Christian practice. And Blougram develops a defense of faith that steers clear of the overconfident certainty we see elsewhere. The monologue is expressly adversarial, with the bishop frankly acknowledging that his conversation partner, Mr. Gigadibs,
“despise[s]” (13) him. The hostility arises from a conflict of values: Blougram states that Gigadibs, although cordial to Blougram in this interaction, rejects the Catholic Church as a worthwhile place to spend one’s life. Or, as Blougram bluntly puts the problem, “you would not be I” (51). Nevertheless, the two have come together with lofty aims: to “see truth dawn together” (17) in after-dinner conversation. The imagery of truth as a sunset emerging “over the glasses’ edge when dinner’s done” (18) is revealing. Blougram does not claim to possess truth himself. It is something external to both these men, appearing at an appropriate time and situation in their conversation. Truth, in this metaphor, may predictably emerge under well-known circumstances, just as the sun regularly and predictably rises in the morning. But Blougram’s “apology,” according to this metaphor, is not a defense of truth that one man possesses and the other lacks. Instead, truth emerges through dialogue and the clashes of conversation.

Just as “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” begins by presenting a very modest picture of faith, it also establishes a particularly different form of skepticism as its rival. For Gigadibs, the bishop claims, is the sort of skeptic whose attitude is far more dependent on certainty than the “naive” faith that the skeptic supposedly rejects. Gigadibs, according to Blougram, is the sort of person whose beliefs and actions require wholehearted and unambiguous commitment. Addressing Gigadibs directly, Blougram says that Gigadibs “did what you preferred ... spoke as you thought ... believed or disbelieved” (54-56) only under the condition that he was “whole and sole yourself” (58). For Gigadibs to do or believe anything, he must agree with those actions or beliefs without the slightest hesitation. And since Gigadibs is unable to assent to Christian doctrine with this sort of confidence, he thus chooses the skeptical route instead. Consequently,
he has little time or patience for the Bishop’s faith; Blougram hypothesizes that Gigadibs, if he were to compliment the Bishop as “no bad fellow” (39), would do so by praising him as “quite above their humbug in his heart” (41). Skepticism, at least as Blougram understands it working in Gigadibs, is not far removed from faith or certainty (even if, in this case, it’s a certainty about being unable to believe in Christian doctrine without doubts or qualifications). Gigadibs’ version of skepticism assumes that belief and doubt cannot be mingled without self-deception or a dishonesty. Irreligion, Browning suggests, can be just as certain in itself as faith. When naive certainty fails, Gigadibs turns to naive skepticism.

But it is just this rigid separation of belief and doubt that Bishop Blougram will attack in his apology. He refuses to accept this sort of crude binary. Playing along, he concedes to Gigadibs that, if faith is defined as absolute certainty, he is himself a skeptic. According to those terms, the bishop concedes that he “[does] not believe” (161). But this is not the devastating concession that Gigadibs might think. It is instead a meaningless “disbelief” that emerges only if belief must meet preposterously high levels of certainty. It is only in this sense that the bishop is an unbeliever. He is a skeptic only if faith must exclude anything that is “not fixed, / Absolute and exclusive” (162-3). And Bishop Blougram, of course, won’t accept that exclusion; he drops his urbane and gentle tone for a moment in order to issue a flat denial: “You’re wrong” (164). Instead, he cheerfully admits that his version of Christian faith does not claim to have certain knowledge. His formulation is worth considering in detail: “Meanwhile, I know where difficulties lie / I could not, cannot, solve, nor ever shall, / So give up hope accordingly to solve –” (165-167). Knowledge, for the bishop, is an awareness of the problems, limitations, and blind spots in one’s beliefs. But unlike Gigadibs, who insists on either a puritanical version of belief
or a militant skepticism, Bishop Blougram has no problem acknowledging difficulties mixed in his faith. Of the two men, it is the skeptic who insists on a naive sort of certainty, not the bishop. The believer – cautious and aware of difficulties with his faith – appears cannier than his rival.

And Bishop Blougram has another powerful argument on his behalf: although he must concede that belief is not something pure and incorruptible, he argues that skepticism cannot be pure either. Playing along with Gigadibs for the sake of argument, he claims that neither of them are – or could ever be – unbelievers who are “calm and complete, determinately fixed / To-day, to-morrow and forever” (174-175). They must choose, he says, between belief haunted by doubt or doubt haunted by a belief that “shakes us by fits, / Confounds us like its predecessor” (178-179). Neither faith nor doubt, the bishop argues, can ever appear in a pure and uncontaminated state. The skeptic simply thinks that doubt is a better general perspective than belief, even if neither can be dismissed entirely. Gigadibs, Bishop Blougram declares, has just acquired “a life of doubt diversified by faith” (210) instead of “one of faith diversified by doubt” (211). The difference between each, according to the bishop, is a matter of perspective more than any deep disagreement. Just as the “chess-board” (212) can be called white with black squares or black with white ones, so too are human lives structured by faith and doubt all at once. The metaphor of the chess-board is telling; the presence of opposing colors in a game of chess is the condition that makes a game possible in the first place. The objective in a chess game is for white to defeat black or black to defeat white, not for an impossible hope that one or the other will disappear entirely. Insisting on a rigid separation between faith and doubt, or claiming that one is impossible without wholly eradicating the other, makes no more sense than playing a game of chess with only one set of pieces.
Thus far it might seem as if Bishop Blougram has hit upon an elegant solution to the problem of belief and skepticism. By acknowledging how the two are always found side by side, he sidesteps the dangerous and deluded confidence of Johannes Agricola. He instead appears more like the believing counterpart of the honest skeptic Karshish. But it is here where the power of the dramatic monologue, and its ability to force continual revision of our earlier interpretations, comes most fully into play. For Blougram’s religious thoughts are particularly self-serving. He freely concedes that his religious beliefs are not the product of a disinterested search for truth but a desire to live a life full of “power, peace, pleasantness and length of days” (237). And only when he considers the material advantages that life in the Church provides him does Bishop Blougram make a decision for religious belief. He offers a startlingly frank assessment of his own vices and vanities, declaring that he has a “will to dominate” (321) and a need for “mankind’s respect, / Obedience, and the love that’s born of fear” (324-5). The merit of the Catholic Church, as far as Blougram is concerned, is not that religious belief is inherently superior to doubt (for he has already conceded that both are intertwined together). Rather, the virtue of religious belief is the worldly gain it promises him. While he concedes to Gigadibs that his line of thought would be repellent to a man “made of better elements” (342), Bishop Blougram is comfortable with who he is. An outward commitment to religious belief, combined with a frank acknowledgement of doubt, proves to be the best method of living prosperously. His main interest, as he never tires of telling Gigadibs, is in living comfortably with “what is” instead of thinking about “what might be” (346).

This sort of casual disdain for the merits of his belief, apart from the material benefits that his position in the Church allows him to obtain, might tempt us to read the poem as a
presentation of a contemptible speaker; as Isobel Armstrong notes, the poem is “often seen as a biased lampoon on Catholicism” (312). But if we dismiss Bishop Blougram’s argument as wholly venal, we ignore its real merits and fall into the same sort of unwarranted certainty that Browning takes care to have us avoid. And while the bishop’s frank and cynical attitude is definitely a mark against him, the poem gives us abundant evidence that his argument is not just sophistry. Unlike Johannes Agricola (or, to a far lesser extent, Karshish), Bishop Blougram’s beliefs do not distort his perception of the other people who share his world. Agricola’s confidence in predestination leads to his calm contemplation of millions falling into damnation; Karshish, though much more reflective, cannot help but see Lazarus as a madman. Blougram, on the other hand, sees his adversary in gentle and tolerant terms – even acknowledging that Gigadibs has “nobler instincts” and “purer tastes” (343) than him. He begins the poem, before ever starting his “apology,” by imagining Gigadibs giving a (not particularly flattering) assessment of him to skeptical friends, demonstrating his capability to imagine the thoughts and lives of others without imposing his own beliefs on them entirely. He is even able to understand that his own religious stance is historically determined, something that neither Agricola nor Karshish can do. Had he been born “three hundred years ago” (414), Blougram states, he would be unproblematically Christian; on the other hand, if he were born “seventy years since” (416), others would rightly call him a disbeliever. He knows that his ability to adopt the stance he does – believing in his “waking life” (245) while cheerfully acknowledging doubt – owes a great deal to factors beyond his control. Whatever material gain his views stand to get him, the bishop’s apology is hardly the work of pure cynicism.
Hence Bishop Blougram is tolerant, imaginative, sympathetic to hostile viewpoints, and keenly aware of historical context – all qualities that the dramatic monologue requires of its readers. It might not be too much to say that he is, at least when imagining the possible lives and beliefs of others, the ideal reader of the sort of poem he inhabits. The paradox of “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” is how the poem creates a speaker who combines genuine virtues with serious vices. And the guiding metaphor for understanding this paradox, I argue, is one that the bishop himself finds so appealing: that of life on earth as a journey by sea. “We mortals,” he tells Gigadibs, “cross the ocean of this world / Each in his average cabin of a life” (100-101). And the choice of life that each subject makes is like the furnishing of that cabin; while the sizes and options available to each differ, there are limitations and possibilities for all. The best cabin is “not big” and the worst “yields elbow-room” (102). Blougram uses this comparison to allow Gigadibs to challenge and question his life, comparing their dialogue to that between “two college friends” (145) disputing what should be stocked in their respective cabins. The ethical task that we face, according to this metaphor, is to discover how we can “suit our luggage to the cabin’s size” (764). And this comparison of life to a sea journey is one that shares many of the virtues we have seen in Bishop Blougram thus far. It tends to equalize the different subjects who share this world, since everyone is a passenger at sea. It points out the limitations of the freest subjects (who are still given a fairly small cabin) and reminds the least privileged of the space they have to shape their journey. The comparison also diverts attention away from the destination (which all the passengers happen to share), and accounts for both taste and wisdom in shaping a life (since some furnishings seem more essential than others and some more like personal preferences). It is, in other words, a metaphor for life that shows Bishop Blougram at
his very best: cheerfully open to possible lives that differ from his own, and aware of the limitations that his own choices bring.

But the very real flaws of Bishop Blougram get in the way. He has, as Isobel Armstrong puts it, “a narrow and impoverished understanding of possibility” (312). And so he insists, without the thoughtful and tolerant position that he normally has, that there is “one and but one choice suitable to all” (225) passengers: acquiescence to conventional belief. His more mercenary and self-serving motives, in other words, make him overstate his case and insist on the merits of his position. Instead of working through the relationship between belief and doubt that he insightfully discusses, he rests content with the money and power he has. In other words, his character flaws cause him to use his defense of belief and doubt for self-serving ends. But where the Bishop’s insight ends, the reader’s must begin – just as Bishop Blougram articulates a fascinating theory that mixes belief and doubt together quite carefully, so too is the reader forced to balance belief and skepticism when evaluating Blougram’s apology. Relying too heavily on skepticism causes the reader to overlook the real merits of the bishop’s thought, while being too credulous leads to overlooking Bishop Blougram’s cynicism and self-serving attitude. Ironically, a careful reading of “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” is one that ends up reinforcing the bishop’s attitude regardless of his own corruption and flaws – the reader must balance faith and doubt just as Blougram advises. In fact, Bishop Blougram is not unlike Trollope’s ideal priest as outlined in the Clergymen of the Church of England. He recognizes the very real threats to conventional religious assumptions, but is unwilling to abandon Christianity, partly because of the value of the institutional church and partly because, for Trollope and Browning alike, some genuine truth remains amidst the genuinely problematic or false beliefs that the church has acquired.
(Browning, to be sure, does not admire Blougram as much as Trollope likes his careerist, broad-church ministers, but both embrace a Christianity that carefully explores doubt.) Whatever subtleties and nuances emerge out of the details of this interpretation, though, we can see that the unsatisfactory binary of self-deluding certainty and corrosive skepticism has disappeared. In its place, we are left with a narrator who argues for a balance and mixture of belief and doubt – and an interpretation of that narrator which must do the same.

“Fifine at the Fair” presents Browning in his most epistemological mood, raising the subject of knowledge and truth to the explicit theme of the poem. It amplifies all the characteristics of complex belief and doubt that we see in “Bishop Blougram’s Apology”: an expansive concept of “belief” that stretches to cover almost everything about how one lives in the world, elaborate analogies for understanding lived experience that impress with their insight and cynicism all at once, and philosophical ruminations so lengthy and complex that no simple response of approval or doubt is possible. Both monologues, likewise, are delivered by speakers whose credibility is compromised at best. (“Fifine at the Fair” is even more suspicious in this respect – the speaker, Don Juan, embarks on this monologue as an attempt to justify his sexual interest in Fifine to his wife Elvire.) And both poems begin from a common starting point: increasing the speaker’s certainty in their beliefs. While Bishop Blougram’s monologue aims to see “truth dawn” (17), Don Juan declares that his objective is to make his “thoughts be surer what they mean” (149). But while the formulation Don Juan offers may seem like a return to the false confidence of Johannes Agricola – as he phrases it here, his aim is to increase his certainty in what he already knows, not to discover whether what he believes is true or not – the poem is in fact the most radical we have seen so far. Indeed, “Fifine at the Fair” presents a speaker who
goes beyond simply claiming that belief and doubt are intertwined. Don Juan argues that truth and falsity, not just belief and doubt, are indispensable and mutually dependent. They are not just connected, as in Blougram’s chessboard opponents, but allies.

This shift from belief and doubt to truth and falsity might seem like a negligible difference, but I would argue that the change is substantial. None of the three previous monologues present speakers who would have anything good to say about false claims, beliefs, or assertions. Even Bishop Blougram, who cheerfully accepts the presence of doubt as a central part of life, does so because he is aware that complete certainty about religion is too much to hope for. Doubt is simply another tool for ascertaining truth, one that works by challenging assumptions previously held as true. But Don Juan argues that there is something valuable in false belief, not just uncertain belief. While truth is the final objective, it must be reached through persistently encountering falseness. The purpose of life, Don Juan claims, is to “learn the good of peace through strife, / Of love through hate, and reach knowledge by ignorance” (1782-3). This is not quite like simply accepting the presence of doubt – that would simply be a reasonable decision that uncertainty is better than naive confidence. Instead, the argument presented in “Fifine at the Fair” is that truth itself can only be reached by embracing and eventually discarding the false. In this sense, falseness almost becomes a virtue, albeit one whose purpose is eventually leading to greater knowledge of truth. (Don Juan’s argument almost parodies Eliot’s organic secularism; while she acknowledges that truth only gradually emerges out of error, Eliot still finds falseness and error regrettable, not admirable.) We might think of this position in terms of holism, once again, as our previous discussions of holistic belief and doubt show that knowledge sits side by side with vagueness elsewhere in the web of our beliefs.
Don Juan, aware that our belief systems encompass untrue beliefs as well as unfounded presuppositions, embraces falseness as a means of agitating and ultimately strengthening that system. This turmoil, caused by continual contact with error, leads us to a clearer sense of what we do know. These conflicts between truth and falsehood, as Don Juan puts it, are “conquests of the soul” (840) where an encounter with falseness leads to “precise its opposite” (849).

The clearest expression of this argument – that knowledge and truth are acquired not just through careful sorts of belief and doubt but also through embracing falsehood – can be found in Don Juan’s elaborate swimming analogy. This analogy, one that also opens the poem in a brief epilogue not voiced by Don Juan, offers a particularly complex account of how truth and falsehood interact. The physical activity of swimming – a “play o’ the body” (1039) in which the objective is to “slip the sea and hold the heaven” (1040) – becomes an unlikely figure for the pursuit of truth. By identifying the air a swimmer relies upon to live with “truth’s pure plenitude” (1045), Don Juan argues that truth is not something that can be continually inhabited. He is unable, as he puts it, to “be in the air and leave the water altogether” (1030). But a swimmer is also, of course, unable to remain under water for an indefinite period of time; the substance surrounding the swimmer is “too gross / To live in” (1043-44). The very medium in which a swimmer moves, in other words, can prove fatal. And lest we think that this is an overly schematic reading of Don Juan’s metaphor, he hastens to add that the water does indeed represent falseness. Coming up for air, in his words, is a scenario where we find “our head reach truth, while hands explore / The false below” (1061-62). Truth, then, is both essential for life but impossible to consistently acquire; the best that one can do is to get a little of it while immersed in falsehood.
So far this analogy does not radically depart from other explorations of belief that we have already seen. Truth is desirable and necessary for life, while falsehood is potentially deadly even as it surrounds the swimmer. But Don Juan elaborates on this analogy, making it clear that falsehood is not just something that must be fought against. In his telling, the water that represents falseness is a positive virtue. While he concedes that truth is the ultimate virtue, he argues that “practice with the false” (1069) is what makes him more capable of reaching truth. Skillful swimming – the ability to “float, sink, rise, at will” (1071) – allows Don Juan to more successfully reach truth. According to this claim, immersion in falsehood by diving deeper into water only causes him to return to the “surface where I breathe and look about” (1097). The more one pushes against and explores falseness, the more one eventually returns for air. This “exercise” (in both literal and metaphorical senses of the word) paradoxically makes falseness far more central to discovering truth than elsewhere in the monologues we have seen, where it is more of an unavoidable presence than a positive virtue. Here, truth emerges only after a prolonged encounter with falsehood – as Don Juan puts it elsewhere in the poem, all truths have a “false outside, whereby a truth is forced / To issue from within” (1505-06). Encountering truth, in this analogy, comes from extensively surrounding oneself with an unavoidable falseness, since the swimmer “must remain in the water, however far out of it he manages to reach” (Slinn 664). You can’t survive without truth – it is the air that gives life – but you can’t move about in the world without immersing yourself in falsehood and pushing against it.

Don Juan’s argument that truth is best achieved by embracing the untrue can also be seen in the dream vision he recounts later in the poem. He tells Elvire that he has seen a carnival representing all of humanity, and has witnessed seemingly solid architecture “subdivide,
collapse, / And tower again, transformed” (1913-14). Don Juan then hears a voice declare that this is a symbol for truth’s presence in the world: Truth “builds upon the sands, / Though stationed on a rock: and so her work decays, / And so she builds afresh, with like result” (1944-46). This cycle, the voice tells Don Juan, does not discredit truth; instead, it demonstrates mankind’s continual need for truth by dramatizing its importance. Each generation places a greater importance on Truth’s established structures than they warrant; a desire for stable foundations, for believing that “earth now reached is rock” (1953), causes humanity to value particular manifestations of truth more than the continual process of change and renewal. Instead, Don Juan tells us, we are meant to understand that “all’s change, but permanence as well” (2180). And he returns to the discussion of truth and falseness once more, identifying each as a crucial part of the change and permanence pairing: “falsehood that is change, as truth is permanence” (2183). Particular forms that change and disappear are false, but they are nonetheless essential for perceiving truth; as Don Juan argues, “truth is forced / To manifest itself through falsehood” (2195-96). As in his earlier analogy of the swimmer, Don Juan claims that falsehood is not simply error or an obstacle to be avoided whenever possible. It is, instead, the very medium that makes it possible to encounter truth at all. I should pause here and note that this is almost precisely the opposite of the conventional “certainty followed by skepticism” reading of Browning’s poetry. While that reading shows “truth” being undermined by doubt and being revealed as falsehood, “Fifine at the Fair” argues that falsehood eventually makes truth accessible.

As with “Bishop Blougram’s Apology,” it might reasonably be objected that this is far too trusting a reading of “Fifine at the Fair.” For Don Juan, like Bishop Blougram, has an ulterior
motive that should make us deeply suspicious of his statements. In fact, Don Juan makes Bishop Blougram appear positively respectable; this elaborate set of claims is his way to justify his interest in Fifine to his wife. And although his personal failings do not, strictly speaking, invalidate his claims, overlooking the poetic context in order to reduce the poem to an argument is not a sound reading strategy. So we are left with the question aptly posed by Donald S. Hair: “Why place such mottoes or truths, which have the force of revelation, in the mouth of a character as ambiguous and shifty as Juan” (34)? His answer is compelling, as he claims that the poem reflects “Browning’s view that every human being, simply by virtue of speaking – which is, after all, the struggle to make sense of things – will, in convoluted ways and with varying degrees of awareness on the part of the speaker, approach revelation” (34). Thus even Don Juan, who uses his philosophical claims as a means to justify his adultery to his wife, has hit on a critical and revelatory insight. If none of us can escape falseness, Browning suggests, none of us are wholly cut off from truth.

But there is another potential justification I would like to offer. Browning, I would argue, creates an elegant justification for Juan’s claims about truth and falsehood by making his character so disreputable. Our wholly justified suspicion of Don Juan and his motives, in fact, simply reinforces the claims that he has made. For if we look at his monologue with a skeptical eye, aiming to understand the falseness that motivates his arguments in order to uncover the truth behind his actions, we are following the exact procedure that Don Juan himself recommends in his swimming analogy. In order to discover the truth about Don Juan and his dubious character, we are forced to immerse ourselves in the falsehood that he presents – and with a poem well over two thousand lines long, “immersion” is not a bad term for the commitment that “Fifine at the...
Fair” requires. In other words, a skeptical or suspicious reading of Don Juan’s monologue reinforces the claims that he advances about truth emerging through falsehood – even if his reputation remains tarnished as a result. By aiming to discredit the speaker, we undergo the same process he recommends to Elvire. The reader dives into a sea of poetry, pushing through layers of sophistry, self-justifying metaphors, and dense analogies, only to break through to the surface and, gasping for air, perceive the truth about Don Juan and his sophisticated epistemological theories. Browning thus creates an intriguing paradox: to discredit Don Juan as a person, the reader must follow the very procedures that Don Juan recommends to us (albeit for cynical and self-serving reasons). We reach two conclusions – the dishonesty of Don Juan’s personal life and the intelligence behind his theory of belief and doubt – at the same time.

Across these poems, then, we can see that Browning’s dramatic monologues do not simply oppose belief and doubt, knowledge and skepticism. He is not the poet of corrosive skepticism that he is often taken to be. Even those moments where a simplistic and over-confident view is defeated are, as in “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” quite brief – as though Browning has bigger and more interesting problems to work on. Instead, we can understand Browning’s poetry by turning to Don Juan, who claims that art’s purpose is to “fumble for the whole ... surpass the fragment” (689-90) and “reconstruct thereby the ultimate entire” (691). For both speakers and readers of Browning’s monologues, his poems are a fumbling through the challenges of doubt into a stronger set of beliefs. And by looking past atomism toward an entire system of thought, Browning explores the ways that belief works in an entire network of possibilities. His poetry explores how belief and doubt, skepticism and certainty, truth and falseness work together. Browning’s monologues are thus a sophisticated defense of belief in an
increasingly secular age; by openly embracing doubts and questions about belief, he argues, religion can refine itself into something more truthful than it was before. At the same time, the form of the dramatic monologue addresses the challenges of differentiation just as his epistemological themes address secularism; it transforms the subjective lyric poem into a tool for social critique, a bridge from art to fields separated by modernity.

Let me close this chapter by returning to a moment when Browning speaks in his own voice – specifically his declaration to Elizabeth Barrett that “all our life is some form of religion” (654). Having examined his monologues in detail, we can see how this statement fits his ideas of belief even better than we had first imagined. It is sweeping, encompassing all of his existence under the formula of belief. And it is vague, offering no more specific detail than “some form” to describe the ways belief structures lives. The skepticism that appears in the dramatic monologue works, not to undermine belief, but to examine and test it, letting it reshape itself according to new discoveries or insights. Browning remains confident that skeptical challenges can refine Victorian modes of thought, not demolish them. Surprisingly, then, a poet often read as a powerful skeptic emerges as a defender of belief – one who values it enough to study how it changes in response to an enormous number of challenges. That this compelling and convincing statement comes as part of his plea for Elizabeth to elope with him is an irony that Don Juan himself might appreciate.
“A writer, full of a matter he is before all things anxious to express, may think of those laws, the limitations of vocabulary, structure, and the like, as a restriction, but if a real artist will find in them an opportunity.” Walter Pater, “Style” (19)

In the introduction to this dissertation and in each of the chapters that follow, my readings make a recurring argument: poets and novelists deliberately tailor the forms they use to examine secularization, rather than simply inheriting their innate ideological assumptions. Literature does not simply reflect the crisis of secularization – its forms actively engage with religious problems. As I move from Browning to Algernon Charles Swinburne and Augusta Webster, this argument encounters its biggest test yet. For while Trollope and Eliot share a genre, the realist novel, that form is notoriously capacious; it would not be surprising that two novelists approach secularization in very different ways. Browning, Swinburne, and Webster, on the other hand, all write religious-themed verse in a narrower genre: the dramatic monologue, which might plausibly constrain writers much more. Consequently, these two chapters put problems of form and agency at center stage. My hope, then, is that this comparison will reinforce my argument that genres are flexible solutions and not straightjackets. But I also hope it will challenge many assumptions about the dramatic monologue, showing that Browning’s monologues, skillful as they are, are one possible use of the form among many. For Swinburne and Webster share a dubious honor: each wrote a number of innovative monologues about religion that have long been neglected. Of course, they have been ignored alongside the rest of their poetry; studies of
Swinburne and Webster frequently (and rightly) remind the reader that these poets deserve more attention than they get. Jerome McGann’s *Swinburne: an Experiment in Criticism* begins by announcing that “Swinburne’s poetry has remained virtually unexamined for over forty years” (1); over thirty-five years later, McGann could still open an essay by referring to the “long neglect of Swinburne’s work” (283). And while Swinburne was neglected, Webster was completely forgotten. As late as 1993, Dorothy Mermin could state that Webster’s poetry was “almost entirely unknown” (quoted in Sutphin 37). Both poets, major in their day, became minor in ours. So it is no surprise that Robert Langbaum’s *The Poetry of Experience* mentions Swinburne in passing for two paragraphs and never once discusses Webster. Perhaps more surprising, even recent work on the dramatic monologue continues to treat them as marginal figures. Neither plays any significant role in W. David Shaw’s *Origins of the Monologue*, for instance. Of all the major studies of the dramatic monologue, only Glennis Byron’s *Dramatic Monologue* discusses Swinburne and Webster in any detail. Both poets continue to remain marginal figures in any discussion of the form.

But the solution is not simply to read these poets more frequently; their monologues have been neglected because, according to conventional assumptions about the dramatic monologue that critics have long embraced, they don’t do what monologues are expected to do. Both poets, different as they are (and their extreme difference will be central to the argument of this chapter), ignore or actively defy one of the central assumptions critics have made about the dramatic monologue: the belief that the genre, as Shaw puts it, emphasizes the speaker’s “unconscious self-revelations” over “the meanings its speaker is conscious of expressing” (12). The formula varies from critic to critic, but the assumption remains the same. For Langbaum, a dramatic
monologue exists in the “tension between sympathy and moral judgment” (85), forcing readers to balance their appreciation for the speaker with skepticism; for Byron, the dramatic monologue “involves a challenge to the notion of the universal and autonomous self” (55) that develops “a more complex, fragmented and contextualised representation of the subject” (45); and for Adena Rosmarin, dramatic monologues are “poems that invite their readers to distinguish the poem’s meaning from that of its characterized speaker” (56). For all these critics, dramatic monologues depend on irony: they call attention to the discrepancies between authorial intention and speaker meaning. As I have just argued about Browning’s poetry, these theories tend to overstate the role of skepticism and downplay the monologue’s interest in modifying belief. Certainly, though, Browning’s speakers are often unaware of the complexities that readers can discern through their statements. Swinburne and Webster, on the other hand, tend to present speakers whose perspective seems quite reasonable or attractive – as Nicholas Shrimpton argues about Swinburne, the reaction incited by the speakers is “all sympathy and no judgment” (53). According to stringent theories of what the dramatic monologue should be, Webster and Swinburne write defective monologues that “fall incompetently between the two stools of sincerity in fiction” (Shrimpton 53). They are indisputably examples of the form – we are clearly meant to understand that the speakers of the monologues are not the lyric voice of either poet – but examples that reject the irony that critics have long thought essential to the genre.

So far I have been speaking of “Webster and Swinburne” as though their project was identical or closely related. And two elements of their poetry are indeed quite alike: their notably un-ironic monologues and their interest in exploring religious possibilities outside of Christianity. But stylistically, Swinburne and Webster could not be more different. Swinburne’s
poetry is dense, ornate, and lush, gleaming with metaphor and figure, composed of syntactically complex lines that stretch across the page and form tangled, thick webs of verse. Webster favors direct verse that speaks clearly and precisely. The poets explore the extreme poles of a familiar stylistic classification: the distinction between plain, middle, and grand styles. They also choose very different personae for their poems: Swinburne’s speakers are typically pagan gods and humans from historical moments other than contemporary England, while Webster typically (though not always) puts her monologues in the mouths of speakers from everyday Victorian life. Their monologues cannot be considered part of the same project. So why do Swinburne and Webster share a suspicion of Christianity and an interest in moving past the conventions of the dramatic monologue, even as they differ so greatly in their style and choice of speakers? We can begin to answer this question if we remember that, like formal choices generally, style should be understood as a strategy for experimenting with possible positions in the literary and religious fields. Like form, style is not a matter of ornamentation or personal idiosyncrasy. It is instead a resource that makes it possible to think through religious problems in an artistic medium. As Roland Barthes puts it, stylistic features can be thought of as “transformations, derived either from collective formulas ... or, by metaphoric interplay, from idiolectal forms” (98). Style, then, reflects individual choices about the social possibilities within language. It is, as D. A. Miller has argued about both Jane Austen’s free indirect style and the characters she represents, a “deliberately embraced project” (17). But, pace Miller, Swinburne and Webster’s stylistic experiments are not “a willed evacuation of substance” (28) of the sort that Austen’s characters fail to achieve and Austen herself masters. Instead, as the Pater epigraph that opens this chapter suggests, the decisions Swinburne and Webster make – the sentences they write and the
characters they use – provide our best clues for deciphering how they mediate between literature and religion.

I suggest that we can best account for what Webster and Swinburne share (their skepticism and their diminished interest in dramatic irony) and where they differ (their style and their speakers) by thinking of them as writers who transform the dramatic monologue, but move in opposite directions. In a world where secularization has radically expanded the possibilities for belief, these writers of dramatic monologues begin to explore the territory that has opened up in the space of possibles. Browning investigates “the dangerous edge of things” (“Bishop Blougram’s Apology” 395), where familiar figures begin to believe or act in surprising new ways. Swinburne and Webster explore novelty and familiarity, respectively. Swinburne’s extravagant style and his presentation of alien figures – human and divine alike – present pagan understanding of belief as an option that dwarfs conventional Christian belief in daring or grandeur. This extravagance makes his anti-Christian assertions seem rousing and confident. Webster, taking the opposite route, explores how agnosticism can become the comfortable default option in a world where Christian dogma itself begins to look strange. Her speakers do not overshadow Christianity with their grandeur and force; instead, they present agnosticism and doubt as the sensible, humble alternative to the peculiar commitments of belief. Swinburne makes the reader aware of grandiose possibilities and adapts his style to match; Webster turns agnosticism into the possibility waiting for the reader right at home. In short, Swinburne wants to make Christianity appear dismally mundane, and Webster wants to make it appear intolerably strange. What they share is their lack of irony: unlike Browning, their interest does not lie in watching Christian faith adapt itself to a newly secularized world. Both aim to present
possibilities – albeit very different ones – that secularization brings into play. To explore those possibilities, they place their stylistic and thematic concerns above the traditional conventions of the monologue, breaking apart the conventions of the form.

And, as with all the writers I examine here, literary problems intersect with the problem of secularization itself. I suggest that Swinburne’s stylistic and thematic interest in grandeur, and Webster’s contrasting interest in plainness, leads to a familiar problem in secularization theory: the question of Weberian disenchantment. That is, if secularization is the process of increasing rationalization, where the roles of religion, magic, myth, and so on are transformed by the rise of science and Enlightenment reason, how should Christianity be perceived in light of this process? Interestingly enough, Swinburne and Webster take opposing sides in this dispute on secularization, even as they agree in their skeptical attitude toward Christianity. For Swinburne, Victorian religion is already too disenchanted; he favors the grand power of paganism (and matches it to his famously bombastic style) against what he sees as Christianity’s mean, petty status. Ironically, though Swinburne emerges as a major proponent of aesthetics, and he embraces the social changes secularization brings, his poetry and its attraction to paganism reveals a sympathy for an “enchanted” world that Christianity itself displaced. Webster’s poetry, on the other hand, reveals an affinity with the radical Protestant tradition that formed one of the front lines in secularization’s forces – she faults Christianity for being too enchanted, too mystical for a modern, rational world. Swinburne and Webster, despite sharing a disdain for Victorian Christianity, approach the problem of secularization, and the problem of translating their attitudes into literary form, from diametrically opposed positions.

*
The lack of commentary on Swinburne’s dramatic monologues forms a subset of a more extensive problem in Swinburne criticism: an ongoing controversy about whether his poems offer more than just stylistic virtuosity. Scholars of Victorian poetry agree that Swinburne’s style is baroque, ornate and unrestrained: McGann describes it as a “flood of words” and points to “the extensive and complex syntax” (132), and Isobel Armstrong diagnoses Swinburne with “linguistic hysteria,” a swelling of words that aims to “rupture the surface of polite language” (406). The question has long been what to make of this stylistic excess, whether Swinburne’s ornate language amounts to more than dazzling pyrotechnics. As Yisrael Levin puts it, critics differ on the question of whether Swinburne’s poetry contains “any substantial meaning” (661). Not all critics have been inclined to answer favorably. As one of the scholars in the dialogues that comprise McGann’s book argues, unsympathetic critics read Swinburne’s poetry as flashy but empty. At various moments, this reader claims that Swinburne’s style leads to the breakdown of meaning: “a fuzz of words and linguistic forms which become an incantation” (132), “a deliberate attack on language” (152), “an unintelligible level of statement” (169). T. S. Eliot, though conceding that Swinburne’s “amazing number of words” had a “genius” (145) to it, claims that in his poetry “the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning” (149). Even Swinburne himself joined in the fun with his self-parody “Poeta Loquitur,” in which he calls his poetry “a maze of monotonous murmur / Where reason roves ruined by rhyme” (9-10) and declares that “My philosophy, politics, free-thought! / Are worth not three skips of a flea” (5-6). In these accounts, Swinburne’s poetry offers little other than style, filling his verse with a shallowness that no stylistic virtuosity can hide.
Hence the main objection to my argument about Swinburne’s anti-Christian monologues comes from a critical tradition that sees his work as wholly or at least primarily aesthetic in nature, with little interest in ideas. But although Swinburne does indeed have a “horror of moralizing and rationalistic art” (McGann 56), this does not mean that his work offers style without meaning. If we trace the path of Swinburne’s aesthetic theory, following it from art back to the political and religious opinions he initially seems eager to dismiss, we see how Swinburne’s anti-Christian views emerge most effectively through his stylistic grandeur. The best moment to start observing this aesthetic theory is in 1866, just after the scandalous success of *Poems and Ballads*, when Swinburne replies to his critics with his “Notes on Poems and Reviews.” The subject matter of this volume, ranging from blasphemy (“Laus Veneris,” “Hymn to Proserpine”) and lesbianism (“Anactoria”) to sadomasochism (“Dolores”) and necrophilia (“The Leper”), not surprisingly attracted fierce criticism. Swinburne’s response, needless to say, is not particularly conciliatory. Several of his arguments prefer inciting hostility to calming his critics. He defiantly announces that their complaints are “a matter of infinite indifference” to him, since he does not care if he appears “moral or immoral, Christian or pagan” (349) to his outraged opponents. He cites Byron and Shelley as a precedent for controversial work, claiming that they “openly and insultingly mocked and reviled what the English of their day held most sacred” (349). In fact, Swinburne’s defense of his own writing lingers over the possibility of an equally sharp critique when he coyly declares: “I do not say that, if I chose, I would not do so to the best of my power; I do say that hitherto I have seen fit to do nothing of the kind” (349). And as the essay closes, he sneers at those moralists who would “turn all art and literature ‘into the line of children’” (358), favoring an art that is “neither puerile nor feminine” (359) but bold,
confrontational, and determined to shock the complacent Victorian reader. He aligns his poetry with masculinity, against the conventional morality he assigns, in a regrettable sexism, to women and children. Swinburne viewed himself, not as a stylist who avoided substance, but a warrior fighting the Victorian status quo in the name of a “large, liberal, sincere” (358) literature.

But beyond this righteous indignation, Swinburne makes two substantive arguments in defense of his poetry. His main claim simply reminds readers that the dramatic monologue does not let the speaker’s meaning equate to the author’s own views. *Poems and Ballads*, he tells us, “is dramatic, many-faced, multifarious; and no utterance of enjoyment or despair, belief or unbelief, can properly be assumed as the assertion of its author’s personal feeling or faith” (349). Swinburne appears to be hedging his bets here; while he happily argues for the freedom of poets to attack cherished ideas and challenge their readers with controversial material, he also takes care to point out that these poems are dramatic creations, not lyrics that plainly reflect his own opinions or beliefs. Consequently, when Swinburne discusses his own objectives in writing particular poems, he offers surprisingly modest assessments of what each poem was attempting to do. “Anactoria” becomes a poem that “simply expressed, or tried to express, that violence of affection between one and another which hardens into rage and deepens into despair” (350); its blasphemous rhetoric, Swinburne assures us, should “be taken as the first outcome or outburst of foiled and fruitless passion recoiling on itself” (352). “Dolores” becomes nothing more than an expression of “that transient state of spirit through which a man may be supposed to pass, foiled in love and weary of loving, but not yet in sight of rest” (352). And “Laus Veneris,” instead of a poem defiantly valuing erotic love over Christian duty, becomes an attempt to “rehandle the old story in a new fashion” (355). All of the sexual or religious content in the poems, in other words,
becomes subservient to technical problems or subjective expression. For all the enthusiastic
defiance of Swinburne’s rhetoric, his main line of argument works by minimizing the role his
shocking content plays in favor of the subjectivist or aesthetic goals of dramatic poetry.

On one hand, this argument is convenient for a writer whose work has been denounced
on moral grounds. It lets him sidestep the controversy, keeping him from having to defend the
unconventional morality of the poems or attack the views of his critics. But the terms in which
Swinburne describes his work lead us to the second main thrust of his poetic arguments: a desire
to place aesthetics and expression over ideas. For this reason, I suggest, Swinburne’s stated
interest in technical problems and subjective expression should be taken at face value. In fact,
Swinburne’s defenses of his poems – his modest, technical or expressive aims – actually go
further than one might expect from his use of the dramatic monologue. After all, nothing seems
to be preventing him from arguing that the poems explore the arguments and theological claims
of speakers from diverse historical and mythical situations. Yet Swinburne, despite his
enthusiasm for Shelley and Byron’s radical critiques of English society, defends his poems as
explorations of subjective emotion, not possible sets of belief that different people could have.
But this does not mean that Swinburne’s rhetorical pugnaciousness disappears when he writes
about his poetry in detail. Instead, we must remember that Swinburne, more than any other
writer examined here, leans toward a highly autonomous view of aesthetics. McGann argues that
Swinburne’s prose consistently chooses “aesthetic communication” over “philosophic
discourse” (23); instead of seeking to unite the two terms, as Trollope, Eliot, and Browning do,
Swinburne gives decisive weight to the first. McGann’s shrewd reading explains Swinburne’s
reluctance to interpret his poetry as theological or rhetorical discourse, even when it clearly
engages with anti-Christian themes. His temperamental hostility to conventions of English life –
as expressed in his frank admiration of Shelley and Byron – does not lead him to defend his
poetry as propaganda in a just cause. Even if Swinburne shows no sympathy for those
conventions, he consistently reads his poetry through a primarily aesthetic lens.

Hence the stirring rhetoric that opens “Notes on Poems and Reviews” ends with an
enthusiastic defense of art’s autonomy. Swinburne tells the reader that he waits for the day when
“the press will be as impotent as the pulpit to dictate the laws and remove the landmarks of art;
and those will be laughed at who demand from one thing the qualities of another – who seek for
sermons in sonnets and morality in music” (359). This statement makes a number of important
assumptions clear. In this statement, Swinburne assumes, as Eliot does earlier, that
secularization continues to advance; he hopes that the press’s censorious power will dwindle
away and become as impotent as the church. Religious critics merit no attention whatsoever in
his defense, because their power to control or limit discourse has vanished. Furthermore,
Swinburne argues that his critics are making a simple category mistake – poetry, he asserts,
should not be expected to obey an ethical or didactic standard that is inappropriate for a distinctly
aesthetic form of writing. His defense concludes by looking forward to a day when aesthetics
have won the battle, when “no one will then need to assert, in defence of work done for the
work’s sake, the simple laws of his art which no one will then be permitted to impugn” (359). Of
course, Swinburne’s strong defense of art’s aesthetic function would not have been universally
shared – hence his need to write the defense. (I will examine a counterexample in Christina
Rossetti, who happily accepted the task of creating sermons in sonnets.) But his strategy remains
interesting for its enthusiastic acceptance of differentiation. He is happy to trade art’s ethical or
religious potential for greater aesthetic freedom and power; in fact, for Swinburne, such a trade has no real disadvantages. His position can be illuminated by comparing it with Trollope’s: while both agree that secularization is inevitable and desirable, Trollope embraces it because he thinks it will stabilize religion. Swinburne embraces secularization, despite his antipathy to Victorian Christianity’s dull, “disenchanted” nature, because he thinks it will kill Christianity off entirely. Since Trollope has only the vaguest doctrinal commitments beyond a general assent to Christian theology, he decides that the Church of England’s main task should be moral instruction. Swinburne differs with both positions; as we will see, he objected to specific claims in Christian dogma and to Victorian morality itself. For Trollope, then, secularization becomes an opportunity for religion to shift its primary focus, while for Swinburne, religion has nothing left to offer.

This critical statement makes it appear as though Swinburne’s poetry essentially fulfills the highly differentiated “autonomous art” function described by Habermas (but not found in any of the Victorian literature we have read). And at times Swinburne certainly does seem to adopt this uncompromising position. His *William Blake: A Critical Essay* grants literary form supreme place in poetry, sternly insisting that “the laws and duties of art it is never permissible to forget” (35). In fact, form and artistry seem to be the only aspect Swinburne considers here. In an audacious rewriting of the Christian Parable of the Talents, Swinburne declares that moral art leads to bad art:

Art for art’s sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her (or if not she need hardly be concerned overmuch); but from the man who falls to artistic work with a moral purpose, shall be
taken away even that which he has—whatever of capacity for doing well in either way he may have at starting (91).

Art, Swinburne insists, cannot become a “handmaid of religion, exponent of duty, servant of fact, pioneer of morality” (90). Religious or ethical didacticism added to art simply produces bad art and ineffective moralizing. Ergo, he claims, “no chief artist or poet has ever been fit to hold rank among the world’s supreme benefactors in the way of doctrine, philanthropy, reform, guidance, or example” (87). Even those poets who might seem to be exceptions—Swinburne names Dante, Shelley, and Hugo as examples—succeed as poets, not rhetoricians or philosophers. Their work would be worthless if it were translated into “bad verse,” but would retain its power if the doctrine was removed and the “manner or form” (87) left. Art, in Swinburne’s account, only destroys itself if compromised with other forms of writing. It cannot “serve both masters” (87).

But Swinburne’s aestheticism often appears less dogmatic than these proclamations would indicate. Several years later, in his essay “Victor Hugo: L’année terrible,” his aestheticism opens the door for social critique or religious commentary. Swinburne (not above a little self-plagiarism) repeats the exact line about “art for art’s sake first of all” (Essays and Studies 41-42) that so powerfully argues for pure art over committed art (to borrow a term from Adorno’s “Commitment”). “The worth of a poem,” he tells us, “has properly nothing to do with its moral meaning or design” (42). Here, though, Swinburne qualifies his earlier embrace of pure aesthetics. After all, “art for art’s sake first of all” is not the same as a deliberate proscription on bringing moral or intellectual ideas into literature; it simply insists on giving aesthetics the place of honor. And in fact, he refuses to follow the doctrine of pure aesthetics by condemning art that
chooses to “ally itself with moral or religious passion, with the ethics or the politics of a nation or an age” (42). Art for art’s sake, Swinburne now claims, is “true in the positive sense, false in the negative; sound as an affirmation, unsound as a prohibition” (43). While artists are obligated to secure the aesthetic core that makes their work successful, they also have “the liberty of bringing within the range of it [art] any subject that under these conditions may be so brought and included within his proper scope of work” (43). Swinburne’s aestheticism takes a surprising turn here: as always, he rejects those who “judge of art by her capacity to serve some other good end than the production of good work” (43), but he also denounces those critics who “would ostracise every artist found guilty of a moral sense” (44). As enthusiastic as he was to refute the moralizing critics who denounced his poetry, Swinburne hesitates to accept the strictures of pure aesthetics. His own desire to comment on ethical and religious themes makes him concede that art might bridge the gap between aesthetics and social commentary. As a result, even Swinburne, the writer examined here who is most sympathetic to autonomous art, backs away from pure aesthetics. He too ultimately falls under the category of “partial differentiation,” even if he stresses the latter term more than the former.

Having found a place for religious argument in genuine poetry, Swinburne’s work can incorporate his deep antipathy to Christianity. Margot K. Louis has shown that this hostility was not a reflexive or unthinking hostility to conventional Victorian religion: Swinburne’s objections to religion were detailed and informed. She convincingly argues that Swinburne’s poetry enacted a “criticism of High Church sacramentalism” that was “at once radical and exact” (3). Raised in an Anglo-Catholic household, he rejected Christianity while at Oxford. Consequently, he rejected the belief in divine order to the universe (most prominently figured for Swinburne in
sacramental terms, according to Louis – hence his frequent parodies of the eucharist). Instead, he began to pursue a “new perception of meaning” that was “at once less time-bound and more fluid than Christian order” (Louis 20). In a letter to his friend E. C. Stedman, Swinburne declared that “a natural God was the absurdest of all human figments” (quoted in Louis 10). If any sense of worship or reverence remained, he continued, it should reside in an appreciation for human ability and possibility. “We who worship no material incarnation of any qualities, no person,” Swinburne tells Stedman, “may worship the divine humanity, the ideal of human perfection and aspiration, without worshipping any God, any person, any fetish at all” (quoted in Louis 10). The emphasis on human perfection over Christian faith or conventional religious belief, as we will see, proves crucial for understanding how Swinburne’s monologues jettison irony in favor of enthusiastic antitheism.

In fact, Swinburne’s hostility to Christianity leads him to argue that many forms of Victorian Christian faith make for feeble poetry. In *Essays and Studies*, reviewing Matthew Arnold’s poetry, Swinburne adopts the persona of a “French critic” who announces that “toute véritable religion, sombre ou radieuse, tragique ou riante, est une chose essentiellement poétique ... Vénus ou Moloch, Jésus ou Brahma, n’importe” (131). True poetry, in theory, can adopt any stance the writer chooses; describing poetry, Swinburne announces that “pour la morale, elle est mauvaise et bonne, chaste et libertine; pour la religion, elle est incrédule et fidèle, soumise et rebelle” (131). But Swinburne introduces this “French critic” by praising Arnold for avoiding the “wearisome” verse of “reluctant doubt ... half-hearted hope and half-incredulous faith” (127-8). It seems that he has found a type of religious belief that cannot be translated into effective poetry. Swinburne rejects exploration of doubt and belief, as seen in
Browning’s poetry, as excessively intellectual and unconvincing. While he concedes that honest, passionate declarations of belief can make powerful poetry regardless of what religion they advocate, he makes it clear that his anti-Christian paganism can adopt this passionate view better than the questioning, theologically-minded believer. He sneers at the “melodious regrets and tortuous returns” of the doubting Christian poets, declaring that they leave “the spirit cramped and thirsty” (128). Indeed, “cramped” is a revealing word here; Swinburne’s poetry casts antitheism as a sort of freedom and exploration that the “poetry of doubt” cannot accommodate. Swinburne thus clears the ground for his own pagan writing by ridiculing his contemporaries’ explorations of doubt and faith; he reclassifies this writing as insincere and feebly intellectual, unable to accommodate passionate or energetic verse.

Here Swinburne’s baroque style returns as the key mechanism for creating a poetry of religious ideas that is expansive, not cramped; celebrating human perfection and possibility, not dogma. As McGann’s hostile and friendly critics alike agree, Swinburne’s grandiose style “calls attention to itself” (189). And this lofty, ornate style perfectly fits the sort of anti-Christian monologues that Swinburne writes. True to his disdain for the poetry of faith and doubt, he is not interested in writing monologues that explore the subtleties of Christian belief; instead, he presents speakers whose defiance of conventional Victorian religion makes theological dispute seem petty and inconsequential. The speakers of his monologues present themselves as persons whose perspective goes far beyond the limited views of Christianity, whether they are human speakers who ridicule Christianity as an unattractive religion (“Anactoria,” “Hymn to Proserpine”) or pagan deities who calmly announce that all religions are merely temporary versions of their eternal truth (“Hertha”). In both cases, Swinburne’s poetry does not argue
against Christianity as much as it towers above it, denigrating it as small and unappealing. The eloquence and stylistic grandeur of the poetry furthers these ends: it aims to supplant Victorian Christianity not through argument but through a forceful display of its own power. It partakes in the qualities Cicero attributed to the grand style: it is “magnificent, opulent, stately and ornate ... it implants new feelings and uproots the old” (§97). The style lets Swinburne achieve what Julia F. Saville aptly describes as “viscerally experienced moments when universal ideals are complicated by unthought-of differences” (692). Hence Swinburne’s style helps construct the poetry’s anti-Christian ideology, reinforcing the speakers’ positions outside and beyond religious conventions. The forcefulness and eloquence of the speakers amplify their defiant refusal to be interpreted from within the Christian framework that they reject so enthusiastically. Not surprisingly, the combination of the grand style and pagan or antitheistic beliefs leaves no room for irony in the monologues; Swinburne celebrates these perspectives that aim to leave Christian belief seeming empty or feeble.

* 

To see how Swinburne’s monologues use the grand style to glorify and exalt a pagan, anti-Christian system of belief, we can begin by comparing his “Hymn to Proserpine” to Browning’s “An Epistle of Karshish ...” Both poems are superficially quite similar: they feature speakers from a pre-Christian understanding who encounter the rising power of early Christianity in the world. Neither speaker accepts or even understands Christian beliefs; indeed, both find them preposterous. Though they reject Christianity, they understand it as a phenomenon with growing influence and power – Karshish’s monologue describes the early days of Christianity and its growing influence, while “Hymn to Proserpine” describes the triumph of Christianity in
the Roman Empire. But these similarities soon disappear in light of their diametrically opposed attitudes toward this transformation. While “Karshish” reveals a speaker startled, even tempted by Christianity (though, as we have seen, not able to fully incorporate it into his patterns of belief), “Hymn to Proserpine” regards Christianity with disdain and contempt. Readers are not intended to question or reject the speaker’s assertions; instead, we are meant to admire the speaker’s defiance of the new Christian regime. In other words, Swinburne abandons the irony often thought central to the dramatic monologue, holding up the speaker of “Hymn to Proserpine” as an insightful analyst of Christianity’s rapid growth.

What accounts for this difference? Unlike Browning’s Karshish, whose comfort with his own system of thought gets radically challenged by the arrival of Christianity, “Hymn to Proserpine” presents a speaker who views religion – pagan and Christian alike – as a temporary settlement in a world of constant change. It is revealing that the speaker’s first words are “I have lived long enough” (1): although the decline of pagan religion is regrettable, the speaker understands that no system of belief is permanent. He is a witness to a moment of historical transformation, when the “the old faiths loosen and fall, the new years ruin and rend” (40). Rather than being shocked by Christianity, as Karshish was, the speaker of “Hymn to Proserpine” knows that all religions have a temporary hold on the world. He has resigned himself to the knowledge that “fate is a sea without shore” (41). And the speaker continues to meditate on the sea, a recurring metaphor in Swinburne for cosmic forces beyond human control or knowledge. He is aware that the pagan world he knows will be “cast / Far out with the foam of the present that sweeps to the surf of the past” (47-8), tossed about on the waves of history. Moreover, the speaker insists on the all-encompassing power of this sea that engulfs his pagan
world. Its power is so great, in fact, that “the ends of the earth at the might thereof tremble, and
time is made bare” (64). While the speaker still laments the end of the pagan world, he finds
consolation in his knowledge that its end was inevitable. By placing his ultimate confidence in
impermanence and change, not any particular set of beliefs, “Hymn to Proserpine” resists any
reading that attempts to ironize or unmask the speaker. Instead, the poem attests to the chaos and
flux that will ultimately subsume any system of thought.

Hence the speaker’s disdain for Christianity does not take the form of an argument that
can be confirmed or refuted. It largely rests on an assertion that the triumph of Christianity is
temporary; even in the moment of its rise to power, the speaker announces that it will eventually
be cast into the sea alongside the paganism it replaced. We can see this most clearly in a
particularly scornful couplet, mocking Christianity with rhetorical questions: “Will ye bridle the
deep sea with reins, will ye chasten the high sea with rods? / Will ye take her to chain her with
chains, who is older than all ye Gods?” (65-6). These couplets showcase the stylistic features
that make Swinburne’s poetry so stylistically rich: the anapests that open the rhetorical questions,
the deliberate repetition (“take her to chain her with chain”), and the use of self-evidently absurd
mixed metaphors to showcase the absurdity of trying to tame or control the sea. They also
emphasize two features of the sea upon which the speaker’s critique of Christianity rest – power
and age. The speaker of “Hymn to Proserpine” is skeptical of Christian claims to power and
authority, declaring that Christianity cannot control the sea which predates it and will outlast it.
He even directly addresses Christ, announcing that “thy kingdom shall pass, Galilean, thy dead
shall go down to thee dead” (74). This defiant line confidently reiterates that the sea will
consume all religions, new and old, while specifically mocking Christian belief in the
resurrection – for the speaker, Christianity’s God and followers alike will eventually be tossed into the sea with other discarded religions. And the poem ends on this calm confidence, with a declaration that “there is no God found stronger than death; and death is a sleep” (110). With these statements coming at an age when secularization had gathered increasing power, “Hymn to Proserpine” does not present this confidence as something to be undermined or questioned. Instead, it is meant to look reliable and perceptive, seeing from over a thousand years earlier the crises of the Victorian era.

But of course, “Hymn to Proserpine” is not (or not just) a stoic reflection on the transient nature of human history. It is also a contemptuous attack on Christianity from the perspective of someone who rejects its ethos. While the speaker realizes that no religion can claim a permanent spot in the world, he makes his preference for paganism quite clear. The hymn he sings is in itself an act of defiance, a refusal to adopt Christianity at a time when “all men abase them before [Christ] in spirit” (45). He fondly remembers the “Gods we know not of, who give us our daily breath” as “cruel as love or life, and lovely as death” (11-12), and is disgusted by the “young compassionate Gods” (16) of Christianity. This preference for paganism is not meant to be ironically undermined. Again, we can see clearly what “Hymn to Proserpine” does differently by comparing it to “An Epistle of Karshish”: while Browning’s speaker misunderstands Christianity and demonstrates what a shocking revelation that religion proved to be, Swinburne’s poem shocks the reader by presenting Christianity as something mean and contemptible. Compare, for instance, Karshish’s reference to Christ as a “learned leech” to “Hymn to Proserpine” and its mocking reference to the “dead limbs of gibbeted Gods” (44): the former defamiliarizes Christianity in order to reveal the wonder behind familiar doctrines, while the
latter degrades Christ’s sacrifice by focusing on the physical corpse, a mass of broken flesh and bone. In other words, the speaker of “Hymn to Proserpine” is not ignorant of Christian doctrine or unable to understand it – he rejects its claim to dominance and ridicules its creed. Thanks to his calm acceptance of universal change and the power of his language, we are swept along with his disdain, instead of being encouraged to qualify or reject it.

The stylistic richness (even excess) of Swinburne’s poetry comes into play here, matching the breadth of the speaker’s perspective with an eloquence that calls for our admiration. Just as the speaker’s ability to see beyond single historical moments makes him seem perceptive and wise, his mastery of language makes his statements seem far more compelling than the religion they attack. Hence “Hymn to Proserpine” gathers all Swinburne’s resources to display his antitheism in the most grandiose way possible. Indeed, it signals its aspirations to grandeur in its very meter: unusually in English poetry, it uses rhymed hexameter couplets. The hexameter is so atypical in English verse that, as Stephen Adams has noted, the appearance of dactylic hexameters “virtually always bears reference to its counterpart in Greek and Latin poetry” (63). (Although Swinburne’s hexameters often exchange dactylic feet for anapestic ones, the regular pattern of six stresses to a line remains.) Merely by choosing to write in this verse form, uncommon in English, Swinburne invests the monologue with the grandeur of epic poetry. The meter, in fact, particularly suits the speaker and situation of the dramatic monologue. As the subtitle indicates, “Hymn to Proserpine” is spoken “after the proclamation in Rome of the Christian Faith” – at the very end of the classical era from which the dactylic hexameter and the epic emerged. By casting the poem in a verse form intimately tied to pre-Christian culture, Swinburne gives a note of defiance to the very meter itself. Just as the speaker defies the end of
paganism and the arrival of Christianity, so too does the use of hexameters remind the reader of the resources in Greek and Latin antiquity. It reinforces the elegiac and defiant tone of the speaker’s proud memories of the “Gods dethroned and deceased” (13) and attests to possibilities before (or after) Christianity. And by shaping those possibilities with a verse form linked to the highest form of Greek and Roman literature, “Hymn to Proserpine” gives those possibilities a sense of epic grandeur that makes them seem lofty and compelling.

But Swinburne’s use of the grand style in “Hymn to Proserpine” is not limited to the hexameter. Indeed, the poem indulges in what Isobel Armstrong calls his “poetics of excess” (407) – particularly rhyme, alliteration, and lush imagery – to call attention to the surface of the speaker’s language. True to his reputation as a poet with extraordinary musical skill, Swinburne writes the monologue in both end and internal rhyming couplets, in effect turning the poem into a set of trimeter quatrains. Meanwhile, readers of the poem wade through a number of alliterative phrases – “goodlier gift” (6), “I am sick of singing: the bays burn deep and chafe” (9); “Dropped and deep in the flowers, with strings that flicker like fire” (28) – and so on. The effect, as McGann has argued, is that the poem becomes a sort of “‘Pure Sound’ – a remorselessly self-involved prosodic spectacle” (xxiv). It forces us as readers “to negotiate language through its tactility and sound ... to enlarge our perceptual resources” (xxv). But to what end does the poem require its readers to navigate this dense thicket of language? The stylistic magnificence and grandeur, I argue, directs us away from treating the monologue as an argument to scrutinize or question. Instead, we are meant to be swept away by the eloquence of the language and the force of the speaker’s declarative sentences.
The stylistic brilliance of the monologue, in short, does as much work to reject Christianity as the assertions about the chaotic flux of human history. Not surprisingly, one of the speaker’s main reasons for despising Christianity is essentially an aesthetic one. One of the poem’s most famous lines makes this clear: “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath” (35). The speaker objects to Christianity not just as a temporary incursion on chaos and an unwelcome successor to paganism, but as a power that extinguishes all the colors of the world. As the poem develops, the speaker unfavorably compares the Virgin Mary to a different pagan “goddess” (75) (Venus). Here “Hymn to Proserpine” lavishes attention on the aesthetic qualities that he claims Venus exhibited and Christianity does not: her “deep hair heavily laden with odour and colour of flowers, / White rose of the rose-white water, a silver splendour, a flame” (82-3). The very presence of Venus, the speaker tells us, enhanced the beauty of the world; he describes a moment when “the roses grew rosier, and bluer the sea-blue stream of the bays” (88). The stylistic excess carries his point; the paired repetitions of colors, for instance (white rose, rose-white, bluer sea-blue), deliberately celebrates the color and beauty that the speaker fears is lost with the decline of the pagan world. For the speaker, then, as for Swinburne, Christianity is not just a temporary aberration or a set of beliefs that he cannot accept. It is something worse than all that: ugly. By aligning beauty with anti-Christian beliefs, the beauty of the poem’s own language sharpens the speaker’s hostility to Christianity, letting form reinforce content.

The pattern we have seen emerge in “Hymn to Proserpine” – a speaker whose broad perspective, knowledge of historical and temporal change, and rich, grand language unite to cast Christianity as dated and petty – can be understood as the basic blueprint for Swinburne’s other
anti-Christian monologues. But, as we have seen, this particular set of stylistic features push against the boundaries of the dramatic monologue. By constructing the speaker as an authoritative and confident voice whose language persuades the reader instead of revealing his or her character, Swinburne’s monologues inch closer and closer to the lyric. In the case of “Hymn to Proserpine,” the context and setting make this combination of formal devices work comfortably within the dramatic monologue tradition. The speaker’s assured declarations that all religions are temporary appear credible when spoken by a defiant, thoughtful pagan who witnesses the rise of Christianity. However, not every monologue can capture this quality of Roman stoicism at the decline of one religion and the rise of another. More frequently, Swinburne’s monologues decide to violate or abandon defining characteristics of the genre in order to maintain this self-assured, perceptive, irony-free view of how religions live and die. Faced with the choice between the “depth of characterization” and “ironic detachment” (Shrimpton 53) typically found in dramatic monologues and the authoritative anti-Christian tone of “Hymn to Proserpine,” Swinburne opts for the latter. His other major antitheistic monologues, then, should be understood by looking at how they alter the genre they adopt. This is not to dismiss these other monologues as defective aberrations; it is, instead, to see how Swinburne’s experimentation with form requires him to reshape the genre in order to preserve this complex blend of stylistic devices. In these poems, we see how Swinburne’s attack on Christianity leads him to fashion variations on the dramatic monologue, rather than working comfortably within its conventions.

One approach, as seen in one of Swinburne’s most famous poems, “Anactoria,” is to bend the rules of the genre by introducing deliberate anachronisms into the speaker’s monologue.
“Anactoria” is clearly a dramatic monologue by any reasonable definition of the genre; the speaker is Sappho, speaking to her lover Anactoria about her bitter and sadomasochistic desire. For the first hundred and fifty lines, the poem follows the conventions of the monologue, as Sappho discusses her erotic passions and her wish that Anactoria’s body would be “entombed” (114) in hers. But the poem takes a sharp turn midway through, when Sappho declares that “loves makes all that love him well / As wise as heaven and crueller than hell” (145-6). This speculation on love, cruelty, and power leads to a caustic attack on God:

... were I made as he
Who hath made all things to break them one by one,
If my feet trod upon the stars and sun
And souls of men as his have alway trod,
God knows I might be crueller than God. (148-152)

This passage introduces a digression full of antitheistic invective, full of rhetorical questions that accuse God of immense wrongdoing. Sappho refers to “his incense” as “bitterness” and “his meat” as “Murder?” (171-2), and claims that God’s “iron feet” (172) “Threaten and trample all things and every day” (174). The rage and hostility build to a climax as Sappho announces that, were it possible, she would “smite ... desecrate ... Pierce the cold lips of God with human breath, / And mix his immortality with death” (182-4). “Anactoria” might well be Swinburne at his most overtly anti-Christian. But this attack has not always been received favorably by critics, and not just those readers who object to Swinburne’s blasphemy. It has also been faulted on aesthetic grounds as a flagrant anachronism, since Sappho died over half a millennium before the birth of Christ. It is, as McGann notes, “often criticized as a gratuitous
attack on Christianity, apt for Swinburne but out of character for Sappho” (xxiv). Swinburne seems so eager to denounce Christianity that he abandons the conventions of the dramatic monologue halfway through the poem.

It would be possible to take a prescriptive line here and scold the poem for its anachronistic attack on Christianity. But, of course, “Anactoria”’s startling power should not be dismissed simply because it does not match a prescriptive definition of the dramatic monologue. It is perfectly fair for Swinburne to use Sappho “as a distancing device to disarm the Victorian reader as he proposes his iconoclastic views” (Morgan 180) rather than as a historically accurate character study. Instead, we can ask why the poem so flagrantly violates the illusion of plausible characterization that the earlier lines establish. Unlike the speaker of “Hymn to Proserpine,” there can be no realistic reason for Sappho to denounce Christianity. But by placing his antitheism in Sappho’s mouth, Swinburne borrows the authority of a non-Christian voice known for its eloquence and power. The sacrifice of chronological accuracy is a small price to pay for acquiring the grandeur of her poetry for the anti-Christian cause. Furthermore, Sappho’s confidence in her own exceptional status – her belief that future generations will think of her and say that “earth’s womb has borne in vain / New things, and never this best thing again” (281-2) – gives her the same pride and certainty of the speaker in “Hymn to Proserpine.” Both monologues make their anti-Christian assertions seem decisive and authoritative, the products of wise and perceptive speakers whose eloquence demonstrates their insight. And like “Hymn to Proserpine,” “Anactoria” ends with the image of the “insuperable sea” (304), reminding readers of the chaotic forces that swallow up all conventional systems of morality. Both poems, then, despite being set hundreds of years apart, adopt the same basic speaker: a confident, magisterial
voice from the classical world who scorns Christianity and its beliefs. The poem is less interested in creating a plausible Sappho than in imagining how her lofty position and poetic brilliance would respond to the Christian values Swinburne finds so alienating. If this experiment requires abandoning the plausible characterization we associate with the dramatic monologue, Swinburne is willing to take that step.

While “Anactoria” deliberately undermines the characterization of a conventional dramatic monologue, several other poems – “The Last Oracle” and “Before a Crucifix,” for instance – maintain their authoritative anti-Christian position by minimizing the speaker’s entire existence as a character. Both poems, in fact, are either borderline cases of a dramatic monologue or examples of different genres entirely. They feint in the direction of a clear difference between speaker and author, but let that distinction fall away as the poem develops. “Before a Crucifix,” for instance, might be thought of as a “pseudo-monologue.” As the poem begins, it is, in Margot K. Louis’s words, “a dramatic monologue, apparently” (91). The first word of the poem is “Here” (1), and the poem begins with a description of the “dusty trees / At this lank edge of haggard wood” (1-2) where miserable, exhausted women pray before a crucifix. The poem also introduces a speaker who declares that “I too, that have nor tongue nor knee / For prayer, I have a word to thee” (17-18). With a reasonably clear context and a speaker referring to himself in the first person, we are led to think of “Before a Crucifix” as a dramatic monologue or, at the least, a Romantic lyric. But as the poem develops, this reading seems increasingly implausible. As Louis notes, “after the third stanza the ‘I’ all but disappears; the speaker is granted an impersonal authority, as he confronts in turn the icon, the unknown historical
Jesus” (91). The persona introduced early on becomes nothing more than a device to motivate the poem’s polemical arguments.

“Before a Crucifix” thus abandons the dramatic monologue for unapologetically didactic assertions. Instead of exploring the circumstances or character hinted at in the first three stanzas, the poem develops a series of rhetorical questions and proclamations arguing that Christianity, whatever the merits of the historical Jesus, functions in the nineteenth century as a tool of oppression. The word of God, the speaker argues, may have been intended “to set men free” (36), but it is now nothing more than “a fetter on men’s necks” (32). As we have seen from Swinburne’s poetry more generally, these declarations are not distinguished by their subtlety but by the forcefulness and grandeur of their language. The poem appropriates language describing Christ’s suffering in order to describe what Christianity does to the contemporary world. In an audacious extended metaphor, “Before a Crucifix” claims that Christianity, the religion of a crucified savior, now crucifies those unfortunate enough to live under it. “Faith” (86) becomes a nail driven through one hand, and fear, “forged in the fires of hell and heaven” (87), becomes a nail driven through the other. Priests offer the crucified victims a “sponge full of poison” (92), Christ’s crown of thorns “lighten the weight of gold” (56) on the wealthy and powerful, and, unlike in the narrative of Christ’s death and resurrection, the “sepulchral stone” (72) of mankind’s tomb shows no sign of being rolled away. “Christian creeds,” the speaker finally declares, do nothing more than “spit on Christ” (154). We are not led to examine these shocking statements in order to evaluate the character of the speaker; instead, this startling metaphor is meant to confront us with the oppression and injustice that, for Swinburne, has become the entire contribution of Christianity to our world. As the speaker disappears into a set of impersonal,
authoritative assertions, the language draws our attention to the vehemence and disgust with which Swinburne denounces bourgeois religion.

By abandoning the conceit that the speaker is an individual or character, “Before a Crucifix” speaks for humanity in general instead of a single person. As with “Hymn to Proserpine” and “Anactoria,” the poem insists on a historical perspective that transcends the limitations of any single individual. The speaker’s charge against God, for instance, mentions that the “nineteenth wave of the ages” (37) has passed since the birth of Christ. We are reminded here of the sea metaphor that recurs in Swinburne, pointing us to the vast cosmic forces that overpower any petty attempts to establish one religion as a dominant force in the world. More importantly here, though, the speaker insists on the forces of history in order to emphasize that religion’s harm extends far beyond the personal. Despite any merits that the historical Jesus may have had, the poet tells us, the religion has not “fed full men’s starved-out souls” or “brought freedom upon earth” (38-9). Instead, institutional Christianity has left “the stripes of eighteen hundred years” (126) on the beaten body of the historical Jesus – and, by extension, the human victims of this violence. There is no sense in the poem that the speaker rejects religion for personal reasons; although he admits that he is irreligious, his litany of complaints focus on the evil effects of religion throughout history. Abandoning the monologue form, then, allows Swinburne to increase the authoritative tone of the poem and expand its scope to encompass the entire Christian era. By sacrificing detailed characterization of an individual speaker, the poem gains both a sense of grandeur and a larger historical focus.

If “Before a Crucifix” barely qualifies as a dramatic monologue, “The Last Oracle” borrows the conventions of the genre only to rapidly abandon it for another. This transformation
is particularly striking given that the poem starts by closely following the pattern of the dramatic monologue. It begins with an indication of a specific time – “A. D. 361” – and the speaker begins by addressing an unspeaking audience, lamenting the ages that have “waxed and waned that knew not thee nor thine” (2). The speaker even mentions Julian the Apostate’s declaration (“Thou hast conquered” (15)), the same one Swinburne used previously in “Hymn to Proserpine,” in order to remind the reader of the historical context and the poem’s definite placement in time. Much in the first stanza nudges the reader to consider the poem a “‘companion piece’ to the “Hymn to Proserpine” (Louis 123). But as the poem develops, it becomes increasingly hard to read it as a dramatic monologue. The best indicator that “The Last Oracle” will not be a conventional monologue comes at the end of the stanza, as the speaker introduces the poem’s refrain: “O father of all of us, Paian, Apollo, / Destroyer and healer, hear!” (23-4). We learn that the addressee is a Greek god, not a human interlocutor. Moreover, the refrain, as Louis points out, echoes Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” forcing us to rethink our classification of “The Last Oracle.” A poem that once appeared to be a monologue and companion to “Hymn to Proserpine” now appears to be more of a Romantic ode. By transforming the poem from a monologue to an ode, Swinburne makes his speaker seem authoritative, even prophetic. And since the ode is frequently used to praise and exalt, it helps the poem make its anti-Christian sentiment seem grand and admirable.

Of course, the bold tone and authoritative language of the ode comes from a far different speaker than the speaker of a dramatic monologue. The poem does not explore character or psychology; instead, it aims to glorify its opposition to conventional religion. Consequently, the individualized speaker who appears in dramatic monologues never shows up in “The Last
Oracle.” In fact, the poem never once uses the word “I” – every single use of the first-person pronoun is plural. The pre-Christian world, according to the speaker, was a world “that was ours” (17). The poem’s refrain refers to the “father of all of us” (23). And the final stanza concludes with a declaration of loyalty that speaks for a collective: “We praise, we adore, we beseech, / We arise at thy bidding and follow” (140-1). Individual psychology simply drops out of the poem; just the gestures toward a concrete setting remain nothing more than gestures, the poem leaves its speaker wholly disembodied. For Swinburne, this decision to trade an individualized character for a prophetic voice allows him to emphasize the authority and scope of “The Last Oracle”’s anti-Christian declarations; they are not the beliefs of a single person but the proclamations of a voice who speaks for many.

This lofty, impersonal tone fits the particular tenor of Swinburne’s antitheism. Like “Hymn to Proserpine,” “The Last Oracle” presents Christianity as a regrettable moment in the long history of human activity and thought. But “The Last Oracle” also offers more than the bitter resignation of “Hymn to Proserpine,” where the only consolation for the end of the classical world is the knowledge that no religion lasts forever. Here, the poem ends with an assertion that Apollo and mankind predate Christianity and will outlast it. Apollo’s lips, the speaker declares, generate “the speech of man whence Gods were fashioned” (125). This is not Eliot’s progressive model of history, where religion emerges as an early stage in human development that served its purpose but ultimately must be superseded. Instead, Swinburne argues that any religious system is simply a temporary departure from the quasi-divine (but decidedly anti-Christian) power that lets religion be created and destroyed in the first place. Given the enormous scope of the poem, it seems appropriate that the speaker is more a
representative of humanity in general than a coherent or plausible character. After all, the poem explores how “the soul of man should life up eyes and see” (100) that Christianity’s hold on the world will come to an end; the speaker’s proclamations discuss the imaginative power that makes it “possible for us to make gods and poems” (Louis 123). Consequently, the highly individuated voice so common to the dramatic monologue transforms into an eloquent voice speaking for humanity as a whole. It is as if the very ambition of Swinburne’s attack on Christianity causes him to shed the trappings of the dramatic monologue; the gestures toward a particular historical moment and speaker simply reinforce the thematic message of endless religious change. Once the poem has established this historical context, it can focus its energies on welcoming the power of change and transformation.

Swinburne’s monologues have maintained their sweeping attack on Christianity in several ways: deliberate anachronism, as in “Anactoria”; intentionally thin, even non-existent, speakers, as in “Before a Crucifix”; and transformation from monologue into ode, as in “The Last Oracle.” Finally, Swinburne’s “Hertha” has another trick for radically altering the dramatic monologue: making the speaker who denounces Christianity a divine presence who transcends time and space. Hertha, the goddess of fertility who speaks in the poem, announces that she is “that which began” (1) before everything else in the universe. Hertha, by her own account, produces everything that is: “Out of me God and man” (3). And Hertha also transcends the limits of any particular system of belief or social order, declaring that “God changes, and man, and the form of them bodily; I am the soul” (5). The forms of humanity and religion may change, we are told; Hertha, on the other hand, lurks behind these forms, consistent even if humanity and its beliefs are not. Indeed, all the differences of the world are contained – though
not resolved – within Hertha. She produces “man and woman, and wild-beast and bird” (15); she contains “the grain and the furrow” (36), “the germ and the sod” (39), and “the deed and the doer, the seed and the sower” (40) all at once. This position, needless to say, is a very authoritative one; when Hertha declares that the Christian God is temporary and historically determined, it is not a statement from a human being rejecting religion. Instead, she knows that all religions will fade because she herself “set the shadow called God” (93) in the skies of the world. When she declares at the poem’s climax that “his twilight is come on him” (181) – that Christianity has reached its end – she speaks from a position of authority no human can question. Even if the reader were to do so, Hertha has an answer (the same answer, ironically, God gives Job): “Hast thou known how I fashioned thee, / Child, underground?” (41-2). We are denied any position to question or undermine this supremely confident speech.

Swinburne matches this authoritative tone with some of his most extravagant and refined poetry, relentlessly calling attention to its stylistic accomplishment. “Hertha” features the most intricate metrical form of any of the poems we have examined here: anapestic dimeter for the first four lines of every stanza, anapestic hexameter for the fifth. Moreover, the poem consistently reinforces its own authority with this complex form by stressing the contradictory elements that get reconciled within Hertha herself. Observe how the meter highlights these elements in the following stanza, for instance:

I the mark that is missed
And the arrows that miss,
I the mouth that is kissed
And the breath in the kiss,
The search, and the sought, and the seeker, the soul and the body that is. (21-5)

Throughout the poem, “Hertha” lets the stress fall on contradictory or conventionally opposed elements, particularly in the dimeter lines; this tendency shows binary oppositions being united in Hertha’s calm, implacable voice. The stress consistently falls on the nouns and verbs here, reinforcing Hertha’s message that she incorporates everything at once, and the alliteration of the final line in the stanza helps collapse “search,” “sought,” and “seeker” into one – just as Hertha herself claims to do. The meter also reinforces “Hertha”’s anti-Christian polemic; witness, for instance, how the third line of the poem (“Out of me God and man”) stresses “me” and “man” but not “God,” downgrading God to an afterthought behind Hertha and humanity. And along with all these details, we have the sheer accomplishment of the intricate, complex verse, giving “Hertha” a suitably lofty and grand tone. Once again, we are not meant to scrutinize the claims Hertha makes; we are meant to admire the artifice of the poem and be moved by the enthusiastic rejection of Christianity in favor of a goddess who resolves all divisions within herself.

“Hertha” is so confident, so implacable, and so far removed from the conventional personas we find in dramatic monologues that we might question whether the poem is a dramatic monologue after all. Consider, once again, Shaw’s sensible list of “defining features” for the genre, particularly the first two he lists: “a poem of one-sided conversation in which a speaker, not to be confused with the poet, addresses a silent auditor ... a monologue’s unconscious self-revelations are usually more important than the meanings its speaker is conscious of expressing” (12). “Hertha” clearly fits the first category and just as clearly does not fit the second. What sort of unconscious self-revelations can we expect from a deity who encompasses
every element of life within herself? Pointing out the contradictions and ambiguities in the speech, as we are trained to do from reading Browning, gets us nowhere with a divine figure who, in Whitman’s terms, is large and contains multitudes. The best solution might be to recognize how, as McGann has it, “the poem’s initial generic structure – a dramatic monologue by the dead goddess Hertha – has dissolved into a text that has become an exponent of its own philosophical demonstrations” (“Hertha” 293). As a poem dedicated to collapsing distinctions and artificial restrictions – most notably, the restraints of Christianity – “Hertha” also dissolves the generic distinctions and conventions that appear early on. It shatters the boundaries of the dramatic monologue by making its speaker a supremely authoritative deity, leaving absolutely no room for irony or skepticism to emerge.

Thus Swinburne consistently writes dramatic monologues that radically alter the conventions of the genre (with the possible exception of “Hymn to Proserpine,” and even that poem abandons the incomplete perspective and self-revelation we expect from the form). This tendency is so pronounced, in fact, that we might wonder why he begins with the monologue form at all. Why not just write odes or lyrics? By beginning with the dramatic monologue only to break free of its conventions, Swinburne resolves the tension between his aestheticism and his polemical hostility to Christianity. None of his dramatic monologues can be reduced to Swinburne’s own religious views; they always begin from the subjective expression that he sees as the foundation of aesthetics. But while Browning’s monologues invite readers to question and analyze the speakers’ subjective expressions, Swinburne’s invite readers to embrace them. Swinburne, by refusing to ironize his speakers’ passionate outbursts against Christianity, situates his monologues in a borderland between aesthetics and rhetoric. By grounding his poems in the
dramatic monologue, his poems retain their independence from religious discourse even as they offer very hostile attacks on conventional religion. The insistence on breaking free from generic conventions also reinforces the themes of the poems, as it dramatizes how his antitheistic philosophy liberates subjects. The theme of the poems – a polemical assault on religion – urges us to break free from convention; the form of the poems follow this pattern by breaking free from their own conventions and limitations. We are made aware of these conventions as the poems begin, only to see them abandon those restrictions at the first opportunity. We then see how this anti-Christian message transcends particulars for universals; the lamentation in “Hymn to Proserpine,” the serene confidence of “Hertha,” and the nineteenth-century cynicism of “Before a Crucifix” all deliver largely similar arguments about the end of Christianity. While our attention initially focuses on individual character and circumstance, we quickly learn to ignore that aspect of the poem in favor of the caustic attack on religion. In both senses, then, the poems gain in power by breaking free from the monologue form rather than simply using a different genre. They present an argument against Christianity that, for Swinburne, transcends any historical context.

This power and grandeur ultimately leads to the question of style. The eloquence and grandeur that accompanies Swinburne’s poetry overpowers any tendency to read the poems ironically. They become monologues whose force and grandeur – and the passion of their antitheistic beliefs – ruptures the boundaries of the genre. This consistent use of the grand style helps Swinburne collapse the aesthetic and the anti-Christian philosophy into one; his attack on Christianity and his poetics work on the same principle of excess and extravagance. We have seen repeatedly that the attack on Christianity works on theological and aesthetic grounds;
Christianity, for Swinburne, fails because it is oppressive and restrictive, colorless and ugly. He wishes to exchange it for the rich, unimaginably vast power of the universe – the sea in “Hymn to Proserpine,” Apollo in “The Last Oracle,” Hertha herself. By giving these speakers language full of stylistic excess and grandeur, the form reinforces the content. The texture of Swinburne’s poetry matches the generic experimentation and the passionate desire to be liberated from Christianity: stylistically, generically, and thematically, Swinburne’s dramatic monologues cast aside restraint in favor of glorious excess.

* *

Moving from Swinburne to Augusta Webster, we leave behind his extravagance and grandeur in favor of language that is deliberately much more prosaic – to borrow Charlotte Brontë’s phrase, “something unromantic as Monday morning” (5). Angela Leighton describes Webster as “a determined literalist of the imagination” whose concern is “with ordinary, unheroic men and women, whose lives are determined by the solid facts and prejudices of contemporary society” (164). Her most famous poem, “A Castaway,” fits this description quite well; Webster’s attention typically focuses on everyday life and practical work or reform. There are no monologues from Germanic goddesses or oracles here; instead, Webster tends to ground her work firmly in the Victorian period. (I will examine a rare exception to this rule – Webster’s set of monologues “Anno Domini 33” – to see how her deliberately ordinary poetry approaches material from the Gospels, which seems at first to call for a loftier style.) But although Webster is no Swinburne, her dramatic monologues also violate many of the conventions we associate with the genre. Patricia Rigg has even argued that we might do better to consider her poetry “a genre separate from the dramatic monologue” (76). Given the complexity of her poems, which
seem to fit uncomfortably within the genre of the monologue, as well as Webster’s long and unjust obscurity, I will lay the groundwork for a close reading of her poetry by investigating the principles shaping the style and genre of her poetry. I will begin by examining her poetics in detail, turning from there to her skeptical look at Victorian Christianity.

Webster’s attitude toward poetry and style can be seen particularly clearly in two of her many book reviews. Originally published in the *Examiner* in November of 1877, Webster later combined them into one article in her collection *A Housewife’s Opinions* under the title “A Transcript and a Transcription.” Both reviews investigate two new translations of *Agamemnon*, letting Webster compare the merits of each and, more importantly for our purposes, offer her own theory of poetry and translation. One version, for Webster, has little more than scholarly interest. She is diplomatic about the author (one “Mr. Morshead”), saying that he might well be “a poet to be pleasantly revealed to us in a not remote futurity” (353) – even if not much of a poet in the translation he offers now. His version of Aeschylus, we are told, makes the Greek poet seem like a “melodious and easily intelligible writer” (354), and this is not the compliment it seems. Morshead’s work is instead a falsification of *Agamemnon*, a particularly “un-Aeschylean” (354) work that captures the literal meaning of the work but loses the spirit. For Webster, this gets the process of translation exactly wrong. Translation should aim at “preserving the higher thing, the spirit, at the expense of the lower thing, the letter” (354), and Morshead’s version sacrifices the poem’s power. Ultimately, “there seems to be no reason for its existence” (358). This review reveals Webster’s critical acumen, but very little about her own poetry – although it might be worth noticing Webster’s attention to matters of tone and form, as
when she disapproves of Morshead’s decision to use smooth “four-lined stanzas” (356) to flatten out *Agamemnon*’s complexity.

The second translation reviewed here, however, is much more interesting. For this version of *Agamemnon* was not a competent, unremarkable work by an obscure scholar but a poem from “a chief of poets now” (353) – Robert Browning. And Browning’s translation gives us much more insight into Webster’s own poetics. In part, this difference comes from Webster’s thoughts on an acknowledged master, the main power behind the genre she frequently used. And Webster certainly approves of Browning’s *Agamemnon* much more than Morshead’s. Although it works according to “unflinching self-restraint” and “dogged fidelity,” as Browning aims for scrupulous accuracy to the original, it nevertheless “bears the strong impression of originative power – a power which must have been recognized if Robert Browning had never been heard of before” (353). Morshead’s version is readable but pointless, we are told; Browning, on the other hand, has created something entirely different – “Good or bad it stands alone” (358). It captures the “intolerable harshness” (354) of the original in a way that Morshead never attempts, and Webster, as a fellow poet, approves of this fidelity. “A poet,” we are told, “would no more wish to be changed and embellished to the taste and after the likeness of his translator than a woman aware of beauty would wish to have her portrait painted up to the type of another” (358). She admires his “minute accuracy” (358) to the original, capturing all of its merits and flaws. It seems that Webster has found a remarkable work, thanks to Browning’s own talent and his decision to faithfully capture the spirit of Aeschylus. Given the power of the original and the talent of the translator, Webster argues, “the result ought to have been one of the most magnificent poems in the English language” (358).
But as the phrase “ought to have been” implies, Webster cannot recommend Browning’s translation. Instead of a masterpiece, she laments, it is nothing more than “the most magnificent of ‘cribs’” (358). The reason for her disapproval tells us a great deal about her own poetics: Browning’s translation, however faithful and accurate, is confusing. (Webster’s judgment has been echoed over a century later by Erik Gray, who calls it “perversely literal, to the point of unintelligibility” [131].) Although Webster concedes that the original is difficult, Browning, in her opinion, overdoes it, making the poem “bewilderingly, sometimes hopelessly, obscure” (354). “The reader who knows no Greek at all,” we are told, “will be left bewildered and incredulous” (359). To be sure, Webster argues that translation requires careful attention to particular details, and she appreciates that Browning gives _Agamemnon_ this attention. “Any poet who is worth translating at all,” she declares, “will have used his words with such definite intention that no exactitude in giving their equivalents can be too scrupulous” (359). But Browning goes beyond this “exactitude” and makes the poem more confusing than the original. His desire to capture the syntax and word order of Greek adds “an element – that of confusion or of eccentricity – which was not in the original phrase” (359). Partly at fault, she claims, is Browning’s own tendency to make his poems more difficult than we expect or wish. Browning does not understand, Webster tells us, that “even thoughtful readers of poetry require to be told what it is they are to think” (362). Since we have been raised to expect “a great deal of words to the meaning,” it comes as a shock to find a “spiritual pastor” who gives us “an excessive deal of meaning to the words” (363). We can see two crucial elements of Webster’s poetics emerge here: her assumption that poetry should teach (note how she moves easily from poetry to
“spiritual pastors” here) and the high value she places on clarity. Browning’s obscurity and difficulty, according to Webster, get in the way of these values.

This accusation should not be misunderstood as Webster’s rejection of difficulty or ambition. Instead, her interest in clarity emerges out of a subtle and interesting argument about language. Browning’s desire for literal translation, she argues, eventually leads to mistranslation, “on the principle that if you go very far east you get west” (364). His obsession with capturing the syntax is merely the first sign of a problematic attitude toward language; Browning, Webster claims, places too high a value on the uniqueness of words. He overvalues etymology; he “will by no means let us have a word without its pedigree” (364). Consequently, his translation of Agamemnon makes for difficult reading, as Browning insists on capturing every subtle connotation or historical meaning found in the original Greek. Language, she claims, is full of words that have acquired “a sense having no reference to their root-derivation – or which having once been metaphors have come down to being mere speech-tokens used without the slightest regard to the simile they once epitomised” (364). These words, for Webster, are like coins whose original distinctiveness has been eroded with handling – they “serve the purposes they are put to just as readily with the face blurred out” (364). Here lies the great difference between the two poets: while Browning treats language as a dense network of denotations, connotations, references, and etymologies, where each word contains a host of important secondary attributes, Webster imagines words as worn, well-handled coins.

The metaphor of word as coin is a startling one – Webster emerges as a skillful Victorian poet who urges her readers to pay less attention to the subtleties of language. We should pause and think about what this metaphor implies. First of all, her account of language emphasizes
transaction; words, like coins, are meant to be exchanged with others. Hence for Webster there is little point in valuing a coin for its unique sake – what counts is getting the exchange right. Using “twice as many” English words to translate Greek clearly, Webster argues, is no more “amplification” of the original than it is “overpayment to give two sixpences to discharge a debt of a shilling” (364). Secondly, language for Webster is pragmatic, with the meaning of a word tied closely to its use. Just as a coin is meant to be spent, a word is meant to be used – each exists to satisfy the needs of two people exchanging ideas or money. Finally, and most importantly for understanding Webster’s poetry, this theory of language has a strong commitment to clarity. Just as coins work by assigning accepted value to each individual unit, language is meant to work by making it clear exactly what sort of value any particular token has in an exchange. The older connotations, etymologies, historical references, and previous uses of words become attributes like scratches on the face of a coin or the grooves on its edges: undeniably part of the token, but essentially secondary to its exchange value. Webster’s frustration with Browning derives from this commitment to clarity. His translation, she argues, treats the incidental parts of language as though they were part of its essential value. Words, for Webster, are like coins: almost worthless as unique objects, but immensely valuable because they are an accepted medium of exchange. Browning’s attention to the material of language, Webster implies, is like valuing a quarter for its engraving or metal instead of its usefulness.

But Webster’s embrace of clarity and easy “exchange” should not be read as a sign that she believed in naive theories of language where words always have simple meanings. After all, this metaphor appears near the end of a lengthy review where she explores the difficult problem of translation and the need for precise, careful phrasing. (Her lengthy response to Browning
comes after Webster derides Morshead for treating Agamemnon’s language too casually.)

Webster does not insist that language is perfectly clear and that Browning needlessly complicates the simple process of translation. Instead, she values clarity and communicability as a stylistic achievement, a difficult but rewarding process of selecting just the right words to make writing and its exchange of ideas as comfortable as it can be. To return to Cicero’s old but still-useful distinction between styles, while Swinburne adopts the grand style, Webster aims for the plain style. This style is deliberately prosaic – Swinburne himself, after having read Webster’s volume Portraits, suggested that she “ought really to resign verse for prose” (quoted in Rigg 122). (Webster probably would have returned this disdain; as we will see, she suspects rhetorical and poetic grandeur of hiding sophistry behind its dazzling use of language.) The plain style emphasizes restraint and clarity, following the “ordinary usage” (Cicero §76) familiar to the orator’s audience. It aims for “elegance and neatness” (§79) while being “somewhat subdued in using the other embellishments of language and of thought” (§81). And although it deliberately refrains from exotic or idiosyncratic use of language, the plain style should not be confused with a neutral sort of writing that comes naturally. It is “easy to imitate at first thought, but when attempted nothing is more difficult” (§76). Clear and precise language, of the sort Webster embraces here, becomes a major achievement. It aspires to let ideas and thought circulate as easily as a well-worn coin – even if the writer knows how difficult it is to reach that level of clarity.

Webster’s poetry, both stylistically and thematically, embraces this difficult search for clarity. Her poems, as Patricia Rigg has noted, are distinguished by their “clarity of diction and syntax” (Rigg 69); the baroque, thick, often overwhelming flow of words that we saw in
Swinburne has receded in favor of crisp, direct language. “A Castaway,” in addition to being Webster’s most famous poem, is representative here. Consider the first few lines of the poem:

Poor little diary, with its simple thoughts,

Its good resolves, its ‘Studied French an hour,’

‘Read Modern History,’ ‘Trimmed up my grey hat,’

‘Darned stockings,’ ‘Tatted,’ ‘Practiced my new song,’

‘Went to the daily service,’ ‘Took Bess soup,’

‘Went out to tea.’ Poor simple diary! (1-6)

The poem begins by setting a deliberately prosaic mood. Its language would be indistinguishable from prose without the line breaks reminding us to read it as iambic pentameter. The language is also largely and intentionally free of ornamentation; unlike in Swinburne, where the alliteration, parallelism, syntactic oddities, and so on call our attention to the surface of the language, Webster aims for comprehension and clarity. “A Castaway” matches its plain style with the prosaic subject matter, detailing the everyday activities of the young girl that the speaker once was. Since a “subtle focus on ordinary life” (Rigg 162) emerges as one of Webster’s recurring concerns, “A Castaway” emphasizes the trivial details of the diary. Form fits content once again; if a grandiose theme calls for a style to match, then a plain style, as we see here, perfectly fits a poem that focuses on the everyday.

But the plain style does not just reflect Webster’s interest in the ordinary – it also matches her desire for an accurate and clear perception of the world. Clear language, in her view, leads to clear knowledge. It is no coincidence that “A Castaway” has its speaker examine herself closely in the mirror. When she asks herself the question “what is that?,” referring to herself, she has a
ready answer in the “looking-glass” which “answers it passably” (26-7). Having grown distant from the younger self she once was, she needs to confirm her identity, and the mirror – with its undistorted reflection – gives her a reliable picture of who she is. Having accepted this image, she questions why the rest of English society cannot present itself with the same sort of clarity. The speaker refuses to disguise, or “gloze upon” (77), her appearance; she scorns those who refuse to adopt this honest and clear presentation of who they are. Her first target, in fact, is the lawyer, who uses “noble eloquence” (81) to cheat the legal system and punish the innocent; dishonesty and rhetorical flourishes become moral and aesthetic flaws all at once. Her discovery, as the poem comes to its conclusion, can be thought of as a discovery of the plain truth about her world. Near the end of the poem, the speaker announces that she sees “clear now” (553); Webster’s aim, likewise, is to present that same clarity of vision. The plain style helps fulfill a thematic goal: that of presenting the world with the same clarity as the language in the poem.

Webster’s commitment to accurate perception, ordinary life, and clear language make her monologues quite different from Browning’s. In fact, a number of critics have questioned whether Webster’s poems should be called dramatic monologues at all. Rigg, for instance, prefers the term “monodrama” for describing Webster’s poems, arguing that her work differs enough from other dramatic monologues that they cannot be reasonably classified in the same genre. Webster downplays the “conventions of paradox and irony” (Rigg 76) so familiar to us from Browning’s work; as with Swinburne, Webster’s speakers are typically much more reliable and trustworthy perceivers of the world around them than those in Browning. These speakers show very little of the “lack of self-knowledge” (76) so commonly attributed to the speakers of dramatic monologues. The tension in the poems, when it emerges, comes from a clash between
the speakers’ “external, societal expectations and their internal, individual desires” (Houston 3). Again, we can think of “A Castaway” as a representative example; we are not asked to scrutinize the statements of the narrator in order to see her situation more accurately. We are instead asked to read her clear-sighted, astute thoughts on her life as a prostitute, and we take it for granted that her insights are both informed and defensible. Furthermore, Webster’s poems downplay the importance of individual characterization we see in other monologues; consider, for instance, that almost all of Webster’s speakers are unnamed and most of the poems have titles based on vague descriptions: “A Castaway,” “A Soul in Prison,” “A Painter,” and so on. What matters for Webster is not the uniqueness of her characters, but their representative status as members of a social order, and their ability to describe and critique the world around them. These speakers “divert attention from themselves as individuals and point instead to the social context of the speech” (Rigg 79). I have no particular stake in the debate over whether these poems should be called dramatic monologues or monodramas; as Rigg herself admits, “the terms ‘monodrama’ and ‘dramatic monologue’ were used interchangeably by 1840” (130). But I agree with Rigg that Webster’s poems break from the typical conventions of the dramatic monologue – they are, at the very least, unusual versions of the genre.

Hence Webster makes a calculated decision to emphasize clarity over irony and lack of self-knowledge. Her monologues do not ask the reader to undermine or question their speakers’ perception of the world; typically, the speakers are too aware of their own ignorance to be ironized. Instead, the monologues present speakers who are shrewd interpreters of the world around them, people who see through the fog of hypocrisy or confusion surrounding everyday life. The speakers’ humble “everyman” status (most of the monologues in Portraits are spoken
by unnamed characters who represent broad social classes) positions them as the voice of practical knowledge and honest skepticism, challenging a world of easy answers. Consequently, Webster’s poems typically offer a quasi-agnostic look at Christianity, which emerges from their commitment to clearly understanding pragmatic, everyday life. We know very little about Webster’s own private religious views; she is an author “without collected papers, with no manuscripts extant, and with relatively few personal letters scattered in various archives” (Rigg 15). But the poetry makes it clear that Webster, at the very least, had a strong “ambivalence about Christian faith” (Rigg 110). To be sure, her poems do not attack religion with a Swinburnean intensity. The speakers of her monologues do not reject Christianity because they find it unattractive or politically oppressive; more often, her speakers wish they could believe in Christianity even though their doubt prevents them from returning to the church. Webster’s complaint is not with Christian ethics, then – her speakers often seem attracted to the religious beliefs they reject. Nor do her poems engage in any theological arguments, of the sort we see in Browning’s “Johannes Agricola in Meditation”; Webster does not seek to undermine any particular claims about Christian doctrine. Her strategy, instead, relies upon presenting religious belief as an affront to the cold clarity of facts. Christianity is made to seem “incredible” in the most literal sense of the term: an obscure and dubious system of thought that, whatever its merits and attractions, cannot convince these insightful, relentlessly literal-minded monologuists. With their focus on worldly knowledge, embodied in her “plain-speaking register of secular commonsense” (Leighton and Reynolds 418), Webster’s poems make religion seem all too bizarre for the plain-speaking, clear-perceiving people of the world.
Webster’s early volume *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* contains a series of dramatic monologues, “Anno Domini 33,” that prove useful for seeing just how she transforms the genre. At first glance, it might appear that these poems work comfortably within the monologue tradition established by Browning. Their speakers are specific characters from the story of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection: Bartimaeus, Judas, Pontius Pilate, and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. And befitting their origins in the Gospels, each of these monologues is set in a well-defined context, an attribute typical for Browning’s monologues but very unusual for Webster’s poetry. Bartimaeus praises Christ after his blindness is healed, Judas speaks after having betrayed Jesus, Pilate talks to his wife after having sentenced Jesus to death, and the disciples talk with each other just before encountering the risen Christ. The poems in this sequence, then, explore the thoughts of very specific individuals at very well-defined times; they are not, as Patricia Rigg rightly calls most of Webster’s speakers, “vaguely, at times, abstractly, drawn” (“Social Politics” 75). Nor are the poems set in Victorian England, as in most of her work; they explore life eighteen hundred years earlier. Finally, the poems remain faithful to their source material, never deviating from the stories they adopt. Judas, for instance, truly does repent his decision to betray Jesus, and Bartimaeus remains enthusiastic about his newfound sight. “Anno Domini 33,” then, seems to follow the predictable conventions of the dramatic monologue rather than modifying them.

Indeed, Webster’s decision to follow her source material limits what most of the poems in the sequence can do. “Bartimaeus” has perhaps the most difficult task of these poems, given that there is no way to remove the supernatural from the story without radically deviating from the model. Consequently, the poem’s banal expressions of praise reveal that Webster has a difficult
time creating a song of sincere religious celebration. Her only real addition to the story is her insistence on Bartimaeus’s clear perception – he focuses on the sensory details he can appreciate once again. It is a move from obscurity of vision to clarity; the poem ends with Bartimaeus rejoicing that “the night has passed away” (69). But the poem never rises above the banal thought “How beautiful is everywhere!” (4); a miracle, it seems, is a hard topic for a relentlessly materialist poet. More interesting are the second and fourth poems, poem spoken respectively by Judas and two disciples. Judas, for instance, shows that he has an idiosyncratic understanding of the supernatural. He fully accepts that Jesus had “the Godhead in him” (114) on some level but, pragmatic to the end, assumes that Christ’s divine power died with him. He guiltily imagines future generations “of lost death-struck men / Who’ll cry ‘One came to save us, Jesus came, / But Judas took him from us’” (243-245). And the two men conversing in “The Walk to Emmaus” cling to the feeble hope that Christ’s death was not in vain, only learning of the resurrection at the very end of the poem. Ultimately, though, none of these three poems offer Webster much latitude to explore her pragmatic, prosaic brand of agnosticism. They are better understood as technical exercises in the genre rather than poems that transform the dramatic monologue.

But the third poem, “Pilate,” begins to develop the innovations Webster would exhibit most clearly in Portraits. This poem also contains a number of points in common with Browning’s “Karshish”: a narrator who encounters enough of Christianity to make him uncomfortable but not enough to make him reconsider his entire set of beliefs. That initial similarity, however, develops in two very different ways. While Browning explores one man’s powerful attraction to the idea of Christ’s divinity and resurrection (even if those beliefs cannot be incorporated into a very different system of thought), Webster presents a Pilate who admires
Christianity’s ethics but rejects its supernatural claims. Certainly this Pilate finds Christianity attractive, enough so that he tells his wife Procla (who contributes brief questions in the first half of the poem) that he regrets Jesus’s death. He acknowledges that Jesus, though “of mean state” (98) and unfamiliar with the knowledge of the “wise Greeks” (100), would “yet have left his stamp upon the world / As deep as any sage’s” (101-2). Characteristically for Webster, Pilate praises Christian ethics for being both clear and practical, the two qualities that most distinguish her poetry. Jesus, for Pilate, might have given the world:

something to take for real and hold fast

In the confusion of philosophies

And shifting dulled traditions of our Gods

Who let us wander on and make no sign. (106-9)

His teaching, Pilate assumes, would offer moral and intellectual clarity where Greek and Roman philosophy would not. He does not believe that Christianity would solve all the problems the world faces; the world would remain a “coil of labyrinths” (112) that “wreathe and puzzle round a gaping void / Where truth, we’re told, should be” (115-6). But its teachings could form “a starting point / To find the clue from, and perhaps the goal” (116-7). On the other hand, rival philosophies make truth and clarity seem unattainable and even undesirable; they act as though their work “was to make labyrinths” (119) rather than solve them. Webster’s Pilate thus pays Jesus a very high compliment: he treats him as someone who could have been a powerful ally guide to a clearer perception of truth.

But Pilate’s interest in moral clarity and truth make his attraction to Christianity disappear. For Pilate, whatever promise Christ might have had for guiding the world to truth,
one very stubborn fact remains: he is dead. In response to Procla telling him about the rumors surrounding Jesus’s resurrection, Pilate is uncompromising. He derides her as a “pretty simpleton” (139) and “baby” (143), declaring that death, whatever the rumors say, is not “an actor’s mask / To be thrown off and there’s the man alive” (144-5). Pilate presents himself as an uncompromising voice of harsh, unpleasant truth, unwilling to accept illusions about an afterlife:

But the dead

Lie stark and helpless, then rot into earth,

And there’s an end. That’s the deep sadness, child,

Which all our hearts, outface it as we will,

Faint at and whimper at through all our thoughts,

That the dead are really dead and not asleep,

And so there is no rising. (149-155)

Once again, Pilate infantilizes his wife and her belief that resurrection is possible; he insists that this sort of belief is a retreat into happy delusion instead of facing the realities of death. Notice that his attention is drawn to the body: its immobility, its decay, and finally its disappearance as it becomes indistinguishable from the soil. As in Webster’s poetry more generally, truth about the world means acknowledging brute material fact. Pilate does not object to the ethics of Christianity but to its promise of a life after death – a promise that runs into trouble when faced with the undeniable evidence of dead, decaying bodies. Even when Procla gets him to admit that there must be a soul – since the body, nothing more than “reeking dung” (170) after death, is animated during life – Pilate does not let that concession allow for false hope. The soul must die too, he reasons, since the body becomes an inanimate and decaying lump of flesh. And he
regards the belief that the soul survives without a body almost with repugnance; when considering the idea that the soul could be “part of the great breath we call the air” (175), he rejects it with the rhetorical question “What life were that to us to call it ours?” (177). In any meaningful sense, Pilate insists, belief in an afterlife runs up against the reality of the corpse; he insists, tautologically but firmly, that “we die ... and to die is death” (178). No religious belief, he claims, can avoid this material fact.

Consequently Jesus’s appeal, for Pilate, is decidedly limited. All his potential, Pilate insists, disappears in the cold, hard reality of death. Ultimately, we are told, “dead philosophers / Are just as useful to the living world / As are dead lions, or dead rats” (277-9). Their only merit lies in the dead matter they leave behind, which helps “to make good soil” (280). Moreover, even Christian ethics prove deficient for Pilate. To begin, Pilate assumes that Christianity, with no living “philosopher” or teacher left, will inevitably decay into “counterfeit” versions of Christ’s teaching. He introduces the figure of coins, one Webster would later use to describe her own theory of language, to explain why Christian teaching cannot be separated from the supernatural aspects of the faith. In this analogy, a wise teacher’s thought becomes a set of coins left for humanity to use and exchange. The problem is that most others – “ninety-nine / Out of each hundred” (281-2), in fact – “stamp their own images / On all their dies, and so the coins mean nought” (282-3). Ultimately, any wisdom or knowledge tempts counterfeilers, who efface the “coins” of thought and press their own image upon them. A living Jesus, for Pilate, could forestall this problem, since a living sage can “give us his own gold” (290) instead of forcing us to rely on coins of dubious worth. Even then, though, Pilate sees very little advantage to “authenticated” religious thought; “in true sense,” he concedes, “we’re sure of nothing” (296).
Ultimately, he tells us, any attempt to translate wisdom into a universally accepted, widely exchanged medium like money will fail. Only two facts remain undeniable: “life means a great hurrying on to death” (301) and “death means nothingness” (302). Even if Christian ethics prove attractive – and Pilate certainly admires Jesus – nothing guarantees their truth or insight. We are left, in his account, in a world where this religious system cannot lead us to greater knowledge.

Of course, given that we cannot equate Pilate with Webster, we might be tempted to look for ways in which this speech undermines itself. The dramatic monologue trains us to analyze a speaker skeptically, finding the knowledge that lies behind a speaker’s statements. And Pilate’s monologue seems, at first glance, to fit this pattern. As with Browning’s “Karshish,” the poem’s climax features a speaker who remains dissatisfied with the uneasy conclusions he has reached. Pilate, after a lengthy attempt to dismiss Jesus from his mind, bursts forth with a memory that seems too troubling to reject:

\[
\text{Ah! they say} \\
\text{Through all his anguish he would still look down} \\
\text{With an ineffable strange pitying,} \\
\text{As if ‘twas those below who died, not he;} \\
\text{They say through all he – nay, no more of this. (358-362)}
\]

This moment is exactly the sort of emotional turmoil or surprising turn of thought that, for Shaw, is integral to the dramatic monologue as a genre. It certainly seems to work in ways we recognize; Pilate, whatever his stated intention to dismiss the crucifixion from his mind, cannot do so. Christianity and the suffering Jesus cannot be forgotten so easily. But this outburst, we should observe, does not see Pilate questioning his earlier statements about life and
death. Christ’s compassion for his executioners remains in his mind, but there is no indication that Pilate has changed his opinion about life after death. At most, Pilate proves willing to consider that Jesus might have believed in his own divinity – thinking that the executioners below were doomed instead – but he never appears to reconsider his own belief in the finality of death. We can read this moment ironically, if we insist, but only if we assume that Pilate must be wrong because of our familiarity with the source material; nothing in the poem signals that we should dismiss Pilate’s belief in death as the ultimate and final end to life. His hesitation at this climactic moment reveals that Christian ethics and compassion cannot be dismissed so easily – but the unsentimental, material fact of death remains unchallenged.

“Pilate” matches Webster’s interest in material fact with her insistence on plain, unvarnished, clear style. In fact, he reveals his own skepticism toward poetic flourishes or metaphorical excess in his disapproval of the title “Son of God.” He refers to this name as “one of their Syriac metaphors / Which, like hot-tempered kestrels, overfly / The quarry aimed at” (238-240). This title for Jesus, Pilate claims, introduces excessive complexity where it does not help. Pilate can only rein in the wild metaphor by giving it a decidedly prosaic interpretation; he reasons that, since Jesus had encountered truth and “so was at one near the gods” (268), the title can be explained away as nothing more than a sign of his wisdom. There is, of course, the irony of Pilate using metaphor to denounce another “fanciful” metaphor, but we should remember that Pilate does not reject metaphor in its entirety – just poetic language that obscures clarity rather than capturing it. Consequently, the poem is full of carefully explained metaphors, fitting Webster’s staunch commitment to clear, plain style: philosophers leave coins “of thought” (281), we are “like shipwrecked men” on a “sea of doubts” (308-9), and so on. And
the most memorable stylistic feature of the poem is Pilate’s relentlessly literal exploration of death, insisting on the “putrid flesh” (158) that, ultimately, represents all we know of the world.

It is this uncomfortable commitment to clear, plain, stark reality that makes Pilate seem far more credible than many speakers of dramatic monologues: neither the content nor the form of his speech takes shelter in obscurity.

When we move from “Anno Domini 33” to the later monologues in *Portraits*, we see this same sort of relentless focus on undeniable brute fact and stylistic clarity. The speakers of these monologues follow in Pilate’s footsteps: attracted to Christianity but unable to believe in the supernatural claims that the church upholds. The main difference between these works lies in Webster’s decision to abandon the irony of the dramatic monologue. Throughout *Portraits*, in fact, the speakers present their pragmatic materialism as a sensible, thoughtful response to a deeply confused world; they reject Christianity not out of a hostility toward its ethics but from a sense that it obscures truth about the world instead of revealing it. We can see this pattern clearly in the title of one of Webster’s major monologues, “A Soul in Prison”; the speaker, a skeptic, finds no satisfaction in his agnosticism. He presents himself as a prisoner in the dark, hoping to be lifted into “the happy sunshine” (4) where believers live. This speaker is tormented by genuine anguish, referring to his imagined audience – a pious Christian – as a “looked-for teacher” (1). His agnosticism leads him to “grope and strain” (9) toward faith, looking for a ledge that will let him escape his prison of doubt. Indeed, the speaker even pleads with the faithful Christian for help, asking for advice about where these “ledges” are placed. For his trouble, he is rejected as a “wild wilful soul” (14) who will “rot in the dark” (15) because of his doubt. None of Swinburne’s gleeful antitheism can be seen here; the speaker would happily
choose Christianity if it seemed like a viable option. He is “reaching [his] hand” (3) for help out of this unpleasant doubt.

Unfortunately, the “soul in prison” has no possible escape waiting for him. The Christian, able to lead so many others to religious belief, rejects the skeptic and declares that he is “beyond [his] mercies” (44). The skeptic’s sin is one of honesty: his unfortunate situation is “to long to know / And know too plainly that we know not yet” (42-3). (The “we” in this line is significant; the speaker refers to himself as one of many agnostics who would choose Christianity if they could.) Because of this honesty, the speaker laments, agnostics become nothing more than targets of ridicule from those Christians who should be trying to convince them to change. People like him are reduced to “boggarts to placid Christians in their pews” (47), unbelievers whose only use is as a cautionary tale to the faithful. While his request for better proof seems reasonable and even justified in Biblical precedent – the speaker cites John, Peter, and the disciples on the road to Emmaus as examples of those needing evidence to believe (55-61) – the devout teachers offer no such help. According to the speaker, he approaches them just as “the sick men in his pain / Looks to the doctor whose sharp medicines / Have the taste of health behind them” (98-100). Instead, he is rebuffed. Agnosticism becomes the position of honest seekers, as Christian faith becomes the domain of the arrogant and hostile.

This plea for better proof and more compassionate Christians could, thus far, be read as nothing more than a criticism of Christianity as practiced by smug, self-satisfied Victorians. But the speaker sharpens his attack, making it clear that this is not just a matter of bad evangelical strategy. His first move is to redefine doubt as a genuine search for truth, not a dismissive choice made by someone uninterested in religion. He does not claim, he points out, that “the old faith is
obsolete ... let us laugh” (66-7). Far from laughing, he refers to doubt as “fathomless sorrow” (69), a regrettable state that he would like to leave behind if at all possible. Moreover, he denies that doubt can be understood as a simple rejection of Christianity. “Who doubts wholly?” he asks; “That were not to doubt” (71). Skepticism is thus redefined as a lack of knowledge, not a contemptuous hostility to religious belief. The “soul in prison” doubts because he lacks the proof that religious teachers claim to offer: “Doubt’s to be ignorant, not to deny” (72). Nor is religious skepticism or agnosticism an apathy to religious belief, for the speaker; it is better defined, we are told, as being “wistful after perfect faith” (73). Animated by the search for truth but unable to achieve it, the skeptical speaker presents himself as someone who doubts Christian claims out of the best of intentions. He longs for religious certainty and pleads for enlightenment (a term made explicit in his metaphor of the soul hoping to escape the dark prison), redefining doubt as a genuine desire for truth. “A Soul in Prison” makes skepticism a matter of acknowledging what we do not know while searching for answers, establishing its agnostic speaker as an honest and credible voice.

Having presented himself as a reasonable agnostic searching for religious truth, the speaker proceeds to a second, harsher argument. Webster not only agrees with Tennyson that there is faith in honest doubt, she accuses religious dogmatists of being disingenuous. The very first words of the poem are “Answered a score of times” (1), which we learn is a quotation from a didactic work that the speaker is reading. But we do not know what that answer is (or even the question being asked) – and, the speaker points out, we never will. He reminds the defenders of Christianity of their claim that agnostics waste time “on problems now so many times resolved / That you’ll not re-resolve them” (50-1). Once again, though, these defenders of the faith never
actually give a satisfactory answer to their skeptical listeners (who, we remember, have been presented in a particularly favorable light). Consequently, the speaker’s skepticism continues to mount, as he wonders something much more hostile: “Do these, who know most, not know anything?” (115). His attitude toward his Christian interlocutors becomes overtly confrontational, as his praise for them – “You wise man / And worthy, utter honest in your will” (81-2) – becomes overtly ironic and sarcastic. Having once assumed that these Christian writers are accomplished and perceptive, able to “catch the clue in scholars’ puzzle-knots” and “deft to unweave the coil to its straight thread” (86-7), he learns to his dismay that they are no more knowledgeable than he. The speaker may be unhappy in his skepticism, but he is honest, and none of the authors he reads share that quality.

Ultimately, then, the speaker of “A Soul in Prison” accepts the importance of searching for religious knowledge and truth. He simply inverts the premise that begins the poem: it is the agnostic, he declares, who knows enough to understand the limits of his knowledge. For the speaker, the fiery defenders of Christianity have found obscurity and confusion instead of knowledge, and they hide their ignorance with unearned confidence. Both assent to a proposition often found in Webster: that life is a matter of searching for clear, reliable, accurate knowledge about the world. The speaker has found skepticism instead, having blinded himself in the search for truth:

Not by my sight’s unuse and choice of gloom,

But by too bold a gazing at the sun,

Thinking to apprehend his perfect light

Not darkly through a glass. (136-9)
Webster makes use of a common metaphor for knowledge and ignorance – brightness and darkness – but cleverly turns it on its head. Insofar as the speaker is in darkness, as he concedes at the beginning of the poem, it is because he was exposed to too much light. The “knowledge” of the confident believer is only possible because of their dimmer vision. The speaker chooses to seek light in its most intense and unmediated form (not filtered through a “glass darkly”), and consequently becomes unable to see the “truth” others find so obvious. As a result, he settles on a bitter and difficult truth, which he presents to the devout as a hypothetical question: “Our doubt is consciousness of ignorance, / Your faith unconsciousness of ignorance; / So you know less than we?” (180-2). The greatest light the speaker has found, he laments, makes him skeptical of religious answers without providing any certain knowledge of its own.

Having argued that agnosticism is true knowledge (of a sort) and faith a sort of deliberate ignorance, “A Soul in Prison” finally returns to Webster’s characteristic assertion about religion: Christian belief is too obscure for those who focus, rightly, on clearly perceiving the reality of a practical world. We are, the speaker, claims, “jostling, jostled, through the market world / Where our work lies” (122-3). And in this jostling, active, energetic world, we cannot find everything we would need to fully understand obscure theological claims. We “lack breathing space, lack calm, / Lack skill, lack tools, lack heart, lack everything / For your work of the studies” (123-4). As a result, our minds, worn down by the difficulties of everyday life, are unfit for the hard work of fully understanding a complex world. Any rudimentary attempts at theology are like “when the ploughman tries / His hard unpliant fingers at the pen” (126-7): it produces nothing but a “blurred scrawl” (128). Life, in the speaker’s account, becomes a hard process of trying to turn that blurred scrawl into “some clear belief, enough to get by heart” (132). Knowledge and
religious faith, in short, take part in a lifelong process of clarification – the challenge for all of us, according to the speaker, is to refine the blurred scrawl of what we know into some form of clear belief. As it happens, the only clear belief the speaker has yet found is his knowledge that religious dogma cannot be understood with the certainty its defenders claim. His desire to believe is outweighed by his desire to perceive the world accurately and clearly.

The metaphor of the blurred scrawl leads back to the question of Webster’s style. The urgency and difficulty of this process of clarification, the challenge of refining our “blurred scrawls” into clear and accurate accounts of our belief, reminds us that style, for Webster, is as much ethical as aesthetic. Clear writing, for Webster, goes hand in hand with clear perception; it is a matter of using the appropriate coins of language for a smooth interchange of thought. As every line of this poem shows, the speaker labors to present his clear thought in clear verse. His insistence that “‘Tis a dark world, and no man sees so plain / As he believes he sees ... excepting those / Who are mere blind and know it” (201-3) encapsulates both the content and style of the poem; the speaker argues that knowledge of one’s blindness is the highest form of clarity, in deliberately plain verse. Conversely, for Webster, highly artificial or rhetorical writing goes hand in hand with the deceptive or unconvincing arguments of devout believers, full of undeserved certainty. As the poem draws to its end, the speaker praises the Christian writer’s book, declaring his “approval”:

‘Tis eloquent,

‘Tis subtle, resolute; I like the roar

Of the big battling phrases, like those frets

Of hissing irony – a book to read. (193-6)
But nothing in Webster’s poetry or the speaker’s commitment to clarity should make us read this verdict as a compliment. Its rhetorical pyrotechnics, its stylistic flash, all work to conceal the ignorance behind it. Like a firework in the night sky, the book’s eloquence offers a dazzling but false illumination that fools the eye into ignoring the darkness behind it. Webster’s verse models a different approach – a deliberately plain style dedicated to clear perception. Her style reinforces the ethical commitments of its skeptical speaker. No wonder, then, that the poem abandons any of the ironic self-revelation so typically found in the dramatic monologue; the speaker’s subdued language and awareness of his own limitations make his skepticism difficult to refute. Webster’s plain style and the speaker’s frank acknowledgement of doubt make agnosticism seem like a natural default position.

Thus we see style emerge in “A Soul in Prison” as an ethical problem as well as an aesthetic one; honest, practical agnosticism adopts a clear, plain style to explore what it does not know, while those who choose self-deluding ignorance deceive themselves with eloquence. And “A Preacher” makes this connection between aesthetics, poetic style, and sensible agnosticism particularly clear. The poem can be considered a companion to “A Soul in Prison,” one that presents religious doubt from the perspective of an increasingly uncomfortable clergyman. The impetus for his monologue is a verse from the Pauline epistles, which leads him to think about his concern that he too should “be a castaway” (3) despite everything he preaches to others. Despite his power to convince others to believe in Christian doctrine, he finds himself increasingly unmoved by his religious commitments. But like the speaker of “A Soul in Prison,” the preacher takes no satisfaction from this fact. He would gladly exchange this discomfort for unquestioning acceptance of Christianity, if that were possible. The preacher hopes for someone
to “waken [him]” as he has “wakened others” (18-19), startling him out of his growing doubt and reminding him of his earlier enthusiasm for Christianity. Significantly, he does not wish for better proof or convincing arguments for God’s existence, like the speaker of “A Soul in Prison”; instead, he hopes that the same arguments will be given a new life through another preacher’s eloquence. He longs for someone to reanimate “the old dull skeletons / Of points and morals, inferences, proofs, / Hopes, doubts, persuasions” (8-10) of Christian doctrine, impressing him with the same novelty and eloquence he transmits to others. In the preacher’s dreams, another Christian will come along and use “another, maybe choicer, style” (13) to breathe life into his dying faith. While “A Soul in Prison” presents a skeptic who longs for truth, “A Preacher” offers a contrasting monologue: a Christian hoping for passion and stylistic novelty to invigorate him once more.

Being a preacher himself, the speaker knows eloquence’s power all too well. The problem, as he tells it, is that he has grown numb to his own oratorical skill – he has become the “steward of an eloquence God gives / For others’ use not mine” (20-21). But, as elsewhere in Webster, stylistic grandeur leads away from truth. Most immediately, the problem lies in rhetoric’s tendency to lose its power over time. The preacher, so used to moving others with his sermons and his linguistic power, has seen his work become routine and mechanical. Nor is this a unique problem; indeed, he claims that his weariness is the common state of experienced preachers. He compares himself and other Christian speakers to “clock-work sentinels” (32), teaching Christian doctrine with no inspiration or genuine emotion. All their eloquence has deteriorated into familiar trickery. Ultimately, the preacher thinks of himself as a “callous actor” (60), able to impress his audience “with the passion of his part” (64) but utterly unmoved
by his own powers. He can generate passionate belief in others but has no power to convince himself of the doctrine that has long grown familiar. Eloquence, for Webster, transforms over time into sophistry. Consequently, the preacher’s hope for finding a new, different form of stylistic grandeur will be doomed to failure. Eloquence can work its magic on the audience, but the performer can never regain the required innocence that makes it a valuable tool for teaching Christian doctrine.

Webster’s skepticism toward rhetorical skill is fairly unusual when compared to Swinburne and Browning. For Swinburne, stylistic power is self-justifying, an example of energy bursting free of conventional restraints. And while Browning is alert to the dangers of sophistry, his flawed speakers’ eloquence is one of their most praiseworthy qualities (and, of course, Browning’s own delight with language and its possibilities is far removed from any sort of plain style). Webster, in stark contrast, suspects that rhetorical flourishes hide an emptiness behind their flashy language. The remarkable effect of Webster’s monologue lies in seeing a preacher realize that his problem goes beyond feeling numb to Christian doctrine – instead, he begins to perceive that he knows much less than he thinks, and his skillful preaching has only concealed his own delusion. Despite his genuine desire to love God, he feels “a falseness somewhere” (50) inside. He is forced to confess to God that he cannot see Him “as some can on earth” (97) and “cannot love” (100) Him because of this lack of knowledge. As in “A Soul in Prison,” Webster’s preacher takes no satisfaction in his doubt; he hopes for an emotional shock to remove all skepticism. But he is unable to frighten himself into a “convulsive pious” (128) mood, because his sensible mind forbids him from being swept away by the theatrical eloquence that convinces his congregation. That sort of maneuver, he tells us, only works on those “with
thin minds / Of the effervescent kind, easy to froth” (125-6). As a master of creating oratorical illusion, the preacher knows enough not to be convinced by the emotional appeals he offers his church. He cannot satisfy his thirst for knowledge and Christian love with “a mere mirage sprung up of heat and mist” (151), and he cannot discover any real knowledge that will generate a non-illusory devotion. The preacher has seen through his own tricks and illusions, even though he hopes that his theatricality points to a genuine religious reality. But his work as a skilled orator and talented actor cannot hide his growing belief that there might be nothing behind the scenery, masks, and costumes he uses to promote Christianity. Eloquence not only fades with time, it cannot convince the preacher to love something that might not be true.

It is this passionate commitment to truth – rather than self-satisfied theatricality – that makes skepticism, horrible as it is for the preacher, seem like the only real possibility left. The preacher gains Webster’s approval, and the confidence of the reader, by his brave decision to choose uncertain truth over passionate love for a God he can no longer fully embrace. Even if it were possible for him to turn his rhetorical power inward and convince himself to abandon all doubt, he would refuse to “school [himself] / To an unbased belief and love [God] more / Only through a delusion” (164-6). In a remarkable prayer, he tells God of his choice:

Not so, Lord.

Let me not buy my peace, nay not my soul,

At price of one least word of thy strong truth

Which is Thyself. The perfect love must be

When one shall know thee. (166-170)
As much as the preacher longs to fully love God, he cannot allow that emotional desire to trump his search for truth and knowledge. The prayer introduces layers of ironies: a preacher prays to the God he no longer understands or completely believes in, choosing knowledge of God (if that knowledge leads to conventional Christian faith at all) over the blind certainty of passionate faith. He refuses to let his powerful eloquence stand in the way of his search for clear knowledge about the world. While he clings to the idea that Christianity may prove satisfying in the end – the preacher is not a confirmed skeptic like the speaker of “A Soul in Prison” – he accepts that he might “doubt and be perplexed in soul” (172) because religious truth “seems many and not one” (173). He accepts that the “fulness and minuteness” (175) of religious knowledge might well lead him away from an orthodox Christian understanding of God. The preacher makes the choice to abandon satisfaction or emotional comfort in favor of a commitment to truth – no matter how difficult that truth might be, if it leads him to discover the skepticism his easy eloquence can no longer hide.

This difficult decision to choose knowledge over self-deluding emotion, for Webster, is highly praiseworthy. The preacher continues his prayer with a bold and shocking declaration of just how much more he values truth over comfort. He would, he tells God, rather:

- touch the ark
- To find if thou be there than – thinking hushed
- “‘Tis better to believe, I will believe,
- Though were’t not for belief ‘tis far from proved”–
- Shout with the people “Lo, our God is there,”
- And stun my doubts by iterating faith. (177-182)
Even at the cost of his own life, the preacher declares, he would rather find decisive knowledge of God’s existence – or lack of it. While he certainly wants Christianity to be true, he cannot let his desire be the sole factor deciding what he believes. He is no Bishop Blougram, choosing faith over doubt because of its material benefits in a religious world. The preacher’s commitment to truth overrides his emotional desire for pious certainty. Nor is he willing to bludgeon his better judgment into submission by repeating declarations of faith, as his congregation does; honesty and commitment to knowledge force him to abandon this crude certainty. His eloquence in “iterating faith,” his skill in teaching Christian doctrine from the pulpit, emerges as something that stands against a genuine interest in clearly perceiving truth about the world. Ultimately, the preacher is both unwilling and unable to anesthetize his critical judgment with rhetorical power and persuasion.

But of course, even if the preacher refuses to abandon his own search for knowledge in favor of glib, superficial dogma, his professional position requires him to trade in that sort of empty emotional rhetoric. This is Webster’s most aggressive accusation in “A Preacher”: sermons and Christian teaching, she suggests, force preachers to choose false eloquence over the plain truth of religious uncertainty. The poem ends on a particularly gloomy note, as the preacher realizes that his very skill at his job – his “knack / Of sermon-making” (183-4) – leads him “athwart the truth” (185) instead of towards it. His sermon offers some banal statements on Sunday observance and some rote disapproval of “the pleasures of the world” (227), but he realizes, on second thought, that these claims are untrue; he has no problem with the activities of everyday life or the “natural gaieties of youth” (232). So why, he asks himself, were they included in his sermon? Because his very facility in preaching leads him to say false things,
letting him incorporate “lessons and rebukes long made” (238) that are as easily put in sermons as “one puts dots to i’s, / Crosses to t’s” (240-1). Rhetorical skill is not just irrelevant to truth; the preacher realizes it poses a genuine obstacle to properly understanding the world. Perhaps most damning, he cannot help but admire his own oratorical power as he teaches his congregation something untrue. Although he rejects his sermon, he confesses he “was thrilled to see it moved the listeners” (249); his rhetoric may no longer convince him, but it still carries a seductive emotional appeal. He admires his deceptive sermon because it was “written well” (250), as “habit made the thoughts come fluently / As if they had been real” (251-2). His eloquence – the very quality that makes him a good preacher – makes him a bad teacher, one who deceives his flock with soothing commonplaces, empty dogma, and rote advice.

Thus Webster’s dramatic monologues unite an ethical stance toward religious truth – a principled skepticism that is tempted by Christianity but ultimately unconvinced – with an aesthetic fondness for the plain style. A clear, literal, plain style, one that uses words as though they were coins in common circulation whose main purpose was to facilitate transactions between minds, emerges as the best path to knowledge about the world. Even if what we learn about the world is how little we know, Webster’s speakers consistently remind us to spot confusion and muddled thought in dogmatic belief systems, to eschew emotional language and grand style in favor of clear speech, and to never forget the uncomfortable material realities of everyday life. In her monologues, Christianity consistently emerges as something too baroque to be credible: appealing, certainly, and capable of attracting religious seekers through the sophistry of its defenders, but just too artificial for the practical minds who perceive the world as clearly as they can. Webster’s monologuists promote the plain style as the best way to understand plain
truth, which leads directly to agnosticism or at best a very skeptical sort of Christian faith. Hence she rarely has her speakers undermine their statements with skeptical irony, as the dramatic monologue often tends to do; instead, her speakers’ commitment to honestly understanding the world, even if all they ultimately know is the flaws in false certainty, remains credible. The speakers’ honest thoughts and clear, prosaic and practical view of the world leads Webster to radically alter the conventions of the dramatic monologue as a genre, as Swinburne does, but in completely different ways. While Swinburne uses a grand style to make Christianity seem plain, Webster uses a plain style to make it seem preposterously grand. What unites these two very different poets is their effort to shatter the conventions of their chosen genre through exploring radically different styles and abandoning the epistemological problems that Browning introduced into the form.

Finally, the enormous diversity we have seen within the dramatic monologue – from Browning’s use of the genre to explore changing systems of belief, to Swinburne’s grandiose declarations of Christianity’s historical limits, to Webster’s pragmatic, plain-spoken secularism – reminds us that form’s power to mediate between social spheres, to bridge the gap between aesthetic and religious discourse, works in many different ways. The intersection of large-scale social problems, literary genres and their formal implications, and individual belief results in a vast number of literary possibilities. In these two chapters, a complicated story has emerged: differentiation and secularization lead to the Romantic lyric, which Browning transforms into the dramatic monologue, making it into a tool for exploring how religion adapts to a secularizing world. Swinburne and Webster borrow this new genre and push it in two opposite directions, both meeting in a shared hostility to Christianity. Both, through their stylistic experimentation
and differing choices of speakers, greatly expand the territory of the dramatic monologue, making it safe for particularly blunt expressions of antitheism or skepticism. Subtracting irony, exploring the extremes of poetic style, and bringing in a host of speakers not often found in dramatic monologues, Webster and Swinburne transform the genre into a powerful attack on conventional Victorian Christianity. Just as these poets demonstrate that secularization was embraced for very different reasons, their experiments in style show that writers never just inherit genres – they modify them for projects of their own.
Despite the numerous differences in religious belief between the writers we have examined – Trollope, Eliot, Browning, Swinburne and Webster – all have generally accepted that secularization is unavoidable and even welcome. They have differed, of course, on whether religion itself remains viable or desirable: Swinburne delights in showing his contempt for Christianity, Eliot and Webster reject faith but acknowledge its attractive elements and long history of moral education, and Trollope and Browning maintain that Christianity can thrive by downplaying doctrine in favor of ethics (Trollope) or embracing uncertainty and doubt (Browning). Nevertheless, whether or not they see religion as having a real future, none look back fondly toward a pre-secular world; they agree that religion, if it is to survive, must do so in a secularized environment. This acceptance of secularization carries over to their attitude toward literature. While none are willing to abandon the didactic or pedagogical work of literature in favor of an impossibly “pure” aesthetic, they all assume that literature fundamentally differs from other modes of writing. Their challenge becomes approaching religious problems through literature, preserving literature’s capability to address social problems while securing its commitment to aesthetics. For these writers, “partial differentiation” mainly becomes a concern as it applies to literature – while they reject the idea that literature must stick to a circumscribed aesthetic role, they have no problem with the increasingly limited place of religion, even as they acknowledge its importance. They view secularization in generally favorable terms.

Christina Rossetti stands apart from all these tendencies. Like Browning and Trollope, she was, of course, a Christian; unlike Browning and Trollope, both of whom flirted with or openly embraced heterodoxy, Rossetti’s writing never shows the slightest hesitation about
accepting a deeply traditional form of Christianity. Nor does she accept the idea that literature should hold religious belief at arm’s length. She tends to put theological concerns before literary ones; her final books, in fact, were devoted to religious verse and prose, and were published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Consequently, she resists the process of secularization that the other writers examined here accept as a given fact. Instead, Rossetti aims to craft poetry that primarily works in the service of Christian devotion, not literary or aesthetic ends. Rossetti, unique among this set of writers, approaches literature through religious belief, not the other way around. She refuses to privilege the literary field, and instead looks for its models in devotional poetry designed first and foremost to serve Christian purposes. Her work examines the problem of secularization from a completely different angle than we have seen before. And it presents a challenge that the project I have developed here must meet: if secularization theory has been challenged by the persistence of religion in secular countries, then a theory of literature based on secularization theory must account for writers, like Rossetti, whose work is both significant as literature and deeply religious.

In order to understand the unusual position Rossetti inhabits in the literary field, this chapter advances three claims about Rossetti’s poetry. First, it rejects the tendency to divide her work into two, separating the “good” Rossetti (the writer of imaginative early lyrics) from the “bad” Rossetti (the writer of vast unreadable piles of preachy verse). Instead, I argue, Rossetti’s entire body of poetry should be seen as fundamentally religious; thematically and formally, her work responds to an ideal of Christian self-discipline. Even her most celebrated poem, “Goblin Market,” develops out of the same principles that animate her devotional verse. Secondly, while Rossetti’s poetry is devoutly Christian, it is marked by the very processes of secularization that
inform all the literature examined so far. Her work is a demonstration that religion cannot simply ignore or oppose secularization; even the most devout believer, as her writing makes clear, cannot simply turn back the clock. Consequently, while Rossetti is certainly hostile to rising forms of skepticism, and she rejects or regrets the diminishing place of the church, her poetry is unavoidably shaped by secularization. Her work demonstrates that secularization shapes the formal techniques of Victorian writers who hold fast to traditional religious activity.

Finally, I argue that Rossetti’s poetry sketches one of the possible paths that religion can take in a secularizing world. Her poetry, devout as it is, fully accepts what secularization theorists call the privatization of religion: a process in which “the reach of religion is shortened to just those who accept the teachings” (Bruce 20) of the faith. It thus stands apart from another possible response religion makes to modernity: fundamentalism, defined by José Casanova as an “antimodernist reaction” (140) against secularization that seeks to overturn the changes differentiation brings, and “deprivatization,” the efforts of some religious groups (including, but not limited to, fundamentalists) that “refuse to accept their assigned marginal place in the private sphere” (Casanova 41). Rossetti’s poetry, then, does not lose its interest when she turns to religion; instead, her poetry is a fascinating glimpse at what a deeply traditional form of religion can be in an increasingly secular environment.

Not surprisingly, literary studies, a field that grew up alongside secularization’s insistence that literature is a distinct mode of writing, has had a difficult time accounting for Rossetti’s religious poetry. If your scholarly field is defined by the literary field, how do you make sense of a remarkable poet whose ultimate interests are, nevertheless, not literary? The most frequent solution has been to ignore or disparage Rossetti’s devotional poetry. Only a fraction of her
work has received widespread attention; as Sharon Smulders notes, although Rossetti wrote “over a thousand poems ... six volumes of devotional prose, two collections of fiction, and [a] juvenile novella,” her fame “rests largely on ‘Goblin Market’ and a few short, melancholy lyrics” (ix). These few survivors form (or at least seem to form) an unrepresentative sample, overwhelmingly drawn from her earlier works. Meanwhile, despite its success in her own lifetime – “over twenty-one thousand copies” of her last volume of poetry, *Verses*, had been printed by 1912 (D’Amico 148) – Rossetti’s late poetry has long been left to gather dust. Even when scholars turn their attention to Rossetti’s later works, it is often with an air of disappointment. Critics tend to read this body of work as an unimpressive footnote to her earlier accomplishments: exhausted, weary, and self-denying, revealing a poet who has traded vigor for dogma. It has been characterized as full of “endless, futile repetition and finally resignation” (Esh 840), obsessed with a “sense of imprisonment within a small and shrinking universe of meaning” (Phelan 99). Even Isobel Armstrong’s sympathetic account of Rossetti in her *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics* dismisses her later poetry, flatly claiming that “it is in Christina Rossetti’s earlier poetry that her most powerful energies are at play” (368).

Rossetti’s devotional poetry, widely read in her lifetime, has been ignored or rejected in ours.

There are some signs that this trend might be changing. Scholars have paid increasing attention to Rossetti’s religious beliefs, reading her poetry in the context of Tractarianism. By reminding us of the importance of Rossetti’s Christian faith, recent criticism has prepared the ground for reconsidering this later poetry. Nevertheless, her devotional verse has not yet been given the consideration it deserves. When it is studied, it tends to be bracketed off from and isolated from her celebrated and widely read early poems. Much of this scholarship on Rossetti’s
devotional poetry tends to be biographical and historicist in nature, as in the writing of Diane D’Amico, Esther T. Hu, Emma Mason, Linda Schofield, and G. B. Tennyson. This body of work makes an indispensable contribution to our understanding of Rossetti’s late poetry, but it does not directly address the complaints critics have long made about her devotional writing. Even the scholarship that focuses on Rossetti’s religious verse – for instance, Smulders’ *Christina Rossetti Revisited*, Constance Hassett’s *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style*, and Joel Westerholm’s essay “In Defense of Verses: The Aesthetic and Reputation of Christina Rossetti’s Late Poetry” – emphasizes content over form and style. Thus Smulders’ marvelous analysis of *Verses* describes how the sonnet sequences can be understood as a “pilgrimage” (148), with close reading taking a back seat to summary, and Hassett juxtaposes a stylistic analysis of Rossetti’s sonnet sequences “Monna Innominata” and “Later Life” with a largely thematic reading of *Verses*. Since the religious poetry is largely read biographically or thematically, the idea that Rossetti’s devotional poetry is passive, resigned, and exhausted lingers on. And we lose much of what made her work so important to her Victorian readers.

But Rossetti’s late poetry is not a footnote to her widely-read early work, but a central part of Rossetti’s formal accomplishments. She uses her extraordinary poetic ability – and her embrace of both restrained verse forms and a repetitive but resourceful style – to create religious verse that moves from despair and resignation to determined activity. This argument modifies Amy Billone’s claim that Rossetti’s sonnets are an “overpowering celebration of selfhood” (83); her poetry celebrates not the self as it is but religion’s power to discipline and remake it. She uses poetry – particularly the sonnet’s restrained form – to model how a self gradually conforms to Christian virtues. The style of her poetry and the religious content reinforce one another, both
emphasizing the slow, difficult reshaping of the self that Rossetti places at the heart of Christian practice. Hence the best term to describe the preoccupation of her religious verse is not “renunciation” or “restraint,” but discipline. And while she certainly chooses to renounce a world she sees as empty, she sees this rejection as an active endeavor, a choice to lead an energetic Christian life. In other words, Rossetti does not just encourage readers to “reflect on and examine the progress of their own souls” (85), as James Phelan puts it; she creates a poetry whose repetitive, constrained style mimics the activity of a disciplined Christian life. This view of her poetry transforms the conventional reading of Rossetti’s later poetry as diminished and weak; in fact, when it comes to her religious verse, her later poetry replaces weariness with energetic Christian activity. This sense of dedicated self-discipline appears throughout her devotional sonnets, particularly those in her neglected late volume Verses (1893). Even “Goblin Market,” often considered unique in the Rossetti corpus, reinforces and depends upon these same values of Christian discipline.

By emphasizing energy over exhaustion in this account of Rossetti’s devotional poetry, this argument does not suggest that critics have simply misread this work. Rossetti’s religious poetry is indeed constrained and repetitive, both stylistically and thematically; it obsessively returns to a handful of topics and plays with a limited number of words over and over again. Nor does this argument argue for or against the religious values that Rossetti embraced. What it does suggest is that Rossetti’s ascetic brand of Christianity and her disciplined, repetitive poetry were not lapses into tedious verse or banal orthodoxy after the imaginative work of her early career. Discipline – in religious and aesthetic terms alike – was a value that Rossetti consciously embraced throughout her life as a poet. It was not a principle mindlessly adopted after she lost
her will to experiment; as we will see, even “Goblin Market” is shaped according to this value. Our suspicion of discipline should not blind us to the innovative project Rossetti undertakes in its name. Nor should the now-familiar argument against discipline in Victorian society – one that views it as a secret value behind putatively liberal texts or systems – cause us to misread Rossetti’s work. These arguments, familiar to us from studies such as D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*, suggest that discipline is an unconscious failing of well-meaning Victorian writers. Rossetti, by contrast, consciously and eagerly embraced disciplinary practice and used literary forms that would best encourage her readers to pursue active self-disciplining, instead of lapsing into it despite its best intentions. This argument thus follows Susan Wolfson’s claim that “poetic form ... participates in central discussions of its historical moment” instead of merely reflecting ideological errors around it. Rossetti’s challenge lies in working out this religious discipline in poetic form.

*

Of course, for a twenty-first century reader, Rossetti’s stringent religious views might seem to promise little in the way of interesting poetry. Indeed, abstracted from the poetry that animates them, Rossetti’s version of Christianity can seem narrow and dogmatic. For Rossetti, as most critics recognize, was heavily influenced by the Oxford Movement. The church she attended as a young woman, Christ Church, Albany Street, is “often described as the leading London church of the Oxford Movement” (D’Amico and Kent 93). And the Oxford Movement

---

20 Jerome McGann is exceptional in focusing on the “peculiar Adventist and premillenarian context” (132) of her work, particularly her interest in the religious doctrine called “Soul Sleep,” in which the soul remains dormant after death until Judgment Day. Most critics, however, refer to the Oxford Movement as the primary reference point for her religious views; Diane D’Amico and David A. Kent state the critical consensus by claiming that “Christina Rossetti’s life and art are closely connected to all aspects of the Oxford Movement” (93).
shaped Rossetti’s work in several key ways. To begin, the movement was reactionary in the most literal sense of the word; it began as a response to the perceived threat that liberal reforms posed to the Church of England. C. Brad Faught cites such events as the 1828 repeal of the Corporation Acts and the 1829 Catholic emancipation (3) as reforms that, by granting expanded political freedom to Dissenters and Catholics respectively, seemed to strike at the traditional place of the Church of England. Rossetti’s high-church views, then, respond to secularization and its growing threat to religion’s traditional prestige in British life. Against the growing trend of secularization sweeping Europe, where Christian faith, in Charles Taylor’s terms, was becoming “one human possibility among others” (3), the Oxford Movement strove to return High-Church Christianity to the center of British life. And since it insists on maintaining the traditional preeminence of the Church of England, legally and politically, the Oxford Movement can fairly be considered a force against secularization. Thus Rossetti’s enthusiasm for the Tractarians, and some of her more reactionary political stances (most notoriously, her decision to appear as a signatory to “An Appeal Against Female Suffrage” in 1889 (Hassett 226)), make it tempting for scholars and critics to dismiss her religious writing as an exhausted, tedious body of work.

But while it’s fair to call Rossetti’s religious views reactionary, even if her religious poetry never ventures into the realm of politics, these views also motivated some remarkable and surprising poetry. The Oxford Movement did not limit itself to theological disputes – it was also particularly interested in poetry and aesthetics. According to John Henry Newman himself, the Oxford Movement was heavily influenced, alongside theologians, by imaginative writers such as Walter Scott, Coleridge, Robert Southey, and Wordsworth (Tennyson 15). John Keble, the major
Tractarian poet, wrote to “justify the endeavor of writing sacred poetry” (Tennyson 31) on the grounds that literature, like all else in life, should be an “occasion of devotion” (Tennyson 33). Furthermore, Rossetti’s affinity for the Oxford Movement seems most appropriate when we focus, not on its doctrine, but its emphasis on ritual. In the thirty-fourth of the Tracts for the Times (the source of the name “Tractarians”), the author argues that “a minute ritual” (2) was a valuable part of early Christian faith because it “tended to the inculcation of religious truth” (2). Adopting an Anglo-Catholic stance against the more radical Protestant emphasis on sola scriptura, the tract argues that Christians are bound to obey the rituals of the early Church, even if those rituals are never named in the Bible. Ingeniously, the tract suggests that these rituals are not specifically mentioned because of the “very multiplicity of details” (2) – making a virtue of an apparent weakness in the argument. And the author refers to a “uniform system of discipline” that governs “Christian conduct, worship, or Church government” (3). “Rites and ordinances,” the tract concludes, “are in their nature capable of impressing our memories and imaginations with the great revealed verities” (7). We misunderstand the Oxford Movement, in other words, if we simply reduce it to a doctrinal dispute within the Church of England. Much of its hostility to low-Church Anglicanism, in fact, was due to its emphasis on religious discipline in the form of ritual and practice. To understand ritual, we might think of Durkheim’s definition of religious rites as “fixed modes of action” (36); ritual emphasizes repetitive, disciplined activity. Rossetti, I argue, transposes these Christian devotional practices into her poetry, writing a literature of individualized Christian discipline.

In one crucial respect, though, Rossetti’s devotional poetry acknowledges the reality of secularization. The Oxford Movement’s social and political concerns fade away in her religious
poetry, replaced by an intensely personal and private focus. In part, of course, this was because
the Oxford Movement completely lost its political battles – the march toward religious toleration
and increasing disestablishment continued throughout the nineteenth century. The Oxford
Movement was born out of opposition to Catholic emancipation and increasing tolerance of
dissenters; by the time Rossetti published Verses, Britain had elected and seated its first openly
atheist member of Parliament (Larsen 97). Thus Rossetti’s late devotional poetry responds to a
world where the Church of England’s hold on the public sphere had been permanently shaken.
And although she remains unswervingly orthodox her whole life, Rossetti accepts the
modernization process that places religion firmly in the private sphere. She has implicitly
accepted the claim of secularization theorists, outlined by Steve Bruce in his Religion in the
Modern World, that “religion becomes privatized and is pushed to the margins and interstices of
the social order” as “its focus narrows to the individual” (47). Consequently, Rossetti’s
devotional poetry sketches out what intensely focused Christian self-discipline looks like when
religion’s boundaries have been circumscribed. While the Oxford Movement turned to high-
church ritual in an attempt to fight the privatization of religion, Rossetti explores how ritual
activity can keep Christian belief alive in a world where secularism has transformed the public
sphere.

Hence Rossetti’s own devotional texts both build on, and depart from, the Oxford
Movement. They retain its emphasis on ritual, but translate it into a deeply personal form of
writing. Her religious works, published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge,
range from meditations on the lives of saints (Called to be Saints) to a commentary on the Book
of Revelation (The Face of the Deep). The best place to see her interest in ritual, however, is her
“reading diary” *Time Flies*, a compilation of brief devotional essays interspersed with poetry (which would later be reprinted in her final volume of poetry, *Verses*). The form of *Time Flies* is itself a clue to the importance of ritual. The text is divided up into daily segments, encouraging the reader to form the habit of reading one entry each day of the year. And the text also follows the liturgical calendar of the Church of England, with commentary and poetry often specifically written for saint’s days and other holy days throughout the year. Rossetti even included an appendix at the end of the book with poems and essays tied to moving holy days like Easter, reinforcing the text’s ties to the church calendar. At the same time, Rossetti’s focus is intensely personal: while the text follows the liturgical calendar, it pays surprisingly little attention to church life itself, focusing instead on individual belief and practice. The text is tied to the ritual of church worship, but Rossetti nevertheless accepts the privatized, personal role of faith in a secularizing world. Even as she writes a book for the devout Christian, one that encourages ritualistic practice, she accepts secularization’s insistence that “the weight of religion” increasingly rests on “the moods and motivations of the individual believer” (Asad 39). This paradox – following the church calendar without paying much attention to church life itself – appears throughout the book. Rossetti takes it for granted that her reader is a faithful churchgoer, but she privileges individual belief and judgment; she declares, for instance, that “if we are not truthful one by one, we shall never add up as a truthful community” (55). Ironically, though Rossetti’s writings are the most traditionally Christian of those examined here, the social dimension of religious faith drops out of her discussion almost completely. Rossetti is less likely to examine the social role of religion than any other writer in this study (with the exception of Swinburne, who would have scorned church life as an unspeakably banal topic for poetry).
The form of *Time Flies* encourages the reader to develop a disciplined reading practice in two ways: as a daily habit, and as a commitment to remember the significance of the Church of England’s liturgy and holy days. Rossetti implies that her own devotional writing can encourage Christian behavior by acting as a repetitive practice. As a result, the commentaries contained within *Time Flies* reinforce her sense that ritual and repetitive practice are integral to the life of a faithful Christian. Often these commentaries take the form of a light anecdote that quickly becomes a parable extolling self-discipline. Her entry for July 17 tells the story of being a small girl waiting for a strawberry to ripen; to her dismay, it is eaten by an insect before she can enjoy it. But rather than dismissing this moment as watching “in vain,” she declares that the episode taught her “a council of prudence” (137). This moment was valuable, she tells her readers, because it was an early moment in life where she had “practised self-restraint” (137). (This phrase is a revealing one: “practised” implies repeated activity, and “self-restraint” recalls Rossetti’s focus on the individual over the communal.) On the entry for September 11, telling the story of an elephant whose stubborn insistence on moving a rock causes him to fracture his head, Rossetti insists that his behavior, while counterproductive, was not entirely wrong. She instead finds something “heroic and exemplary” in the elephant’s preference of “his work to himself, his duty to his life” (175). Rossetti even goes so far as to argue that sloth might well be the worst of the seven deadly sins, claiming that all the others “may consist with energy, and energy may always be turned to good account” (40). What emerges in all these brief commentaries is a shared sense of activity. Rossetti claims that the devout Christian should act energetically in obedient ways, not live a quiet life that merely avoids sin. Even when Rossetti stresses restraint, as in her reflections about the strawberry, she argues that restraint is not a
passive state of being but an active practice of shaping behavior. The devotional subject matter and the quotidian form of *Time Flies* make it clear that for Rossetti, Christianity not a doctrinal checklist but also a set of activities.

We can see this emphasis on activity throughout *Time Flies*, as Rossetti repeatedly constructs an image of the Christian life that emphasizes duty, endurance, and hard work. In her commentary for August 8, for instance, she ponders an injunction from the Bible to “run with patience the race that is set before us” (151) and wonders why the text uses the term “patience” instead of “energy or zeal” (151). Rossetti focuses on the tension in the metaphor “run with patience,” observing that the language seems torn between passive and active visions of Christian life. She gestures at the language of passivity here, telling the reader that Christ ran the race of life on Earth with “peace and patience” (152), and quoting the Bible’s statement to the weary believer: “I will give you rest” (152). But she follows this quotation with a decisive declaration that life, for a Christian, should focus on work and not exhausted resignation. She reminds the reader that this quotation is followed with another commandment: “Take my yoke upon you” (152). And she follows this quotation by parsing out the implications of this verse, stating that “a yoke is not for standing still, but for toiling forward” (152). Rossetti acknowledges that the work of a Christian should not be arduous – in her view, the believer is promised rest and patience – but the metaphors of the yoke and the race remain central. In both situations, activity and energy are inseparable from the basic activity of “toil” (152) or running toward a goal. Significantly, both similes in this passage – life as toiling with a yoke or a race to be run – emphasize not just activity but constrained, directed activity channeled toward a clear
purpose. Rossetti encourages readers to work hard in this life, instead of quietly waiting for the next one.

The clearest expression in *Time Flies* of Rossetti’s belief in Christian life as active, energetic work can be found in her entry for October 23. This entry replaces anecdotes and parable with blunt declarations, as she declares that “the Bible bids us go on unto perfection, and press toward the mark. To loiter cannot be to press forward: to stand still cannot be to go on” (204). Christian life, Rossetti argues here, is not a matter of acquiring correct beliefs and then remaining satisfied with one’s spiritual condition as it is. Instead, she claims, the task of the Christian is to constantly press onward, never being satisfied with a place of stasis. This attitude of energy and endless zeal is in part due to Rossetti’s sense of urgency; in the entry that gives *Time Flies* its title, she declares that “time is short and swift and never returns. Time flies” (180). And yet, she claims, we make poor use of the limited time left to them; in her words, “we misappropriate time, we lose time, we waste time, we kill time. We do anything and everything with time, except redeem the time” (180). These expressions of misused time – losing, wasting, killing – all stress how time available for strenuous activity is lost for dubious reasons. Rossetti’s form of Christianity, in other words, is an active, even impatient one. It emphasizes disciplined activity and prudent use of energy, not world-weary resignation. For Rossetti, Christian duty means making use of the time available and continually pressing onward toward a better state. As her sonnet for March 17 (“What is it Jesus saith unto the soul?”) makes clear, her form of Christianity requires the believer to “suffer, and work, and strive for Jesus’ sake” (*TF* 54:13). Suffering is one part of Christian life, but not the dominant note of the poem; instead, her devotional work focuses on activity (“work” and “strive”), not passive resignation.
And in the sonnet, I will argue, she finds a genre that reinforces this interest in energetic self-discipline.

Of course, Christina Rossetti’s significant religious verse extends beyond the boundaries of the sonnet. A number of her best and most powerful religious poems – “Up-Hill,” “A Better Resurrection,” and “An Old-World Thicket,” among others, come to mind – adopted very different verse forms. So why focus on the sonnet? To begin, it was a verse form that Rossetti herself found particularly useful. She wrote sonnets throughout her life; her early work of prose fiction, “Maude,” features a number of sonnets written by the characters as part of a party game, *bouts-rimés*, one that the Rossetti family would also play when Christina was still a teenager (Smulders 124). With the exception of her volume *Sing-Song*, a collection of poetry for children, every volume of poetry she published contains sonnets. *A Pageant*, the last volume of poetry Rossetti published that was not explicitly devotional (that is, not published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), contains two sonnet sequences and many individual sonnets. And her final volume of poetry, *Verses (1893)*, which compiles all the poetry Rossetti had published in her devotional books, begins with a section entirely composed of sonnets (in violation of chronological order – many of the sonnets in this first section of *Verses* were originally published as part of her final devotional book *The Face of the Deep*). To an extent her lifelong interest in the sonnet may have been part of its fashionable status in the nineteenth century, particularly in the pre-Raphaelite circles; her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, of course, had explored the form in his own *The House of Life*. But Christina Rossetti’s interest in the
sonnet cannot simply be explained by its contemporary popularity. Its formal properties and history made it a particularly suitable form for a poet who wished to emphasize the active practice of Christian self-discipline.

To begin, the sonnet carries with it a long history of its various uses, a history that Rossetti shrewdly turned to her own advantage. Of course, much has been made of the sonnet’s Petrarchan origins – both Sharon Smulders and Constance Hassett remark on Rossetti’s struggle with the beliefs and attitudes encoded in that form. Hassett, for instance, discusses her sonnets as an engagement with the styles of “fourteenth- and nineteenth-century poets” (168), and Smulders discusses her “‘radical questioning’ of the formal and conceptual conventions specific to the genre” (128). And, in contrast to the sonnet’s longstanding use as love poetry, Rossetti also picks up on the sonnet’s (almost equally long) history as religious poetry. James Phelan, for instance, points out the enormous influence of Wordsworth’s sonnets on nineteenth-century poetry (85). In the narrower field of devotional poetry, Wordsworth’s Ecclesiastical Sonnets, despite the low reputation in which they are held today, were quite influential for Victorian religious poets. And John Keble, offering what might be thought of as the Tractarian view of the sonnet, referred to it with approval as an “unusually stringent” (Phelan 89) form that productively constrained the writer’s emotions and channeled them in useful directions. By adopting the sonnet, then, Rossetti chooses a form with a long history as both a secular and religious form.

21 The sonnet’s popularity is not insignificant, though; it demonstrates that Rossetti does not simply adopt an “obsolete” form to fit with her conservative religious views. As her connections to the Oxford Movement and the ongoing cultural vitality of the sonnet demonstrate, Rossetti’s devotional poetry cannot be dismissed – either formally or thematically – as a reactionary throwback to an era before secularization. It is, instead, a contemporary response to it.
As with all the writers we have examined, this choice of genre is crucial: forms are not simply hollow containers that hold the content poured into them. Instead, forms mold and shape the material, bridging the gap between text and social context. In Bakhtin’s words, forms and genres are the “drive belts from the history of society to the history of language” (65). But this should not be taken to mean that Rossetti is helplessly tied to the sonnet’s origins; I want to avoid the genetic fallacy that assumes forms simply carry an innate meaning from their original context. Instead, we should see Rossetti’s use of the sonnet as a deliberate choice to use its mixed history to explore the tension between secular and Christian life and a determination to renounce life in the world. For the history of the sonnet is itself marked by a tension between Petrarchan love and Christian devotion. In other words, the form of the sonnet struggles with the same tension that Rossetti writes about in her poetry – the attractions of two mutually opposed modes of living. Consider her much-admired early sonnet, “The World,” which begins by setting out the contrast between secular and Christian life:

By day she wooes me, soft, exceeding fair:
But all night as the moon so changeth she;
Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy
And subtle serpents gliding in her hair. (1-4)

Here Rossetti, although firmly rejecting the world, begins by acknowledging its attractions with the very first verb in the poem (“wooes”). The first line, in fact, could easily be the first line of a wholly conventional Petrarchan love sonnet; only by reading further do we infer

---

22 Bakhtin, for instance, is clear that genres can be “reaccentuated,” or modified – the argument that forms are tied to particular social functions and roles does not mean that forms must always serve those purposes. If genres were not able to be used in a variety of situations and for a number of purposes, literary history would not have the many long-lasting forms that proved useful throughout hundreds or thousands of years.
that the “she” of this line refers to the world of the title and not to a human being. The poem triggers expectations of love poetry, referring to part of its long history, only to renounce that part of its past by making it clear that its subject is the danger and treachery of the world. Rossetti, in other words, turns the storied history of the sonnet to her advantage, letting the genre’s history reinforce the themes of her own poetry.

But it is not just the long history of the sonnet that makes it a useful problem-solving tool for Christina Rossetti. The constraints and demands of the form also make it particularly appropriate for her poetry of Christian self-discipline. As Keble made clear, one of the attractions that the sonnet held for Tractarian poets was its strict form (Phelan 89). Sonnets demand adherence to a series of formal requirements – iambic pentameter, a tight fourteen-line space limitation, and a regular rhyme scheme – that emphasize creativity within strict limitation. And Rossetti’s own sonnets embrace the challenge of meeting these technical requirements of restraint and concision. Significantly, her sonnets follow the Petrarchan form, not the English one. Certainly, this can be understood in large part by referring to her own Italian heritage (and some of her unpublished sonnets, in fact, are written in Italian), but there is also a telling difference in the rhyme schemes of the two types of sonnet. The English model allows for a greater variety of different rhymes – seven in a fourteen-line poem (ABABCDCDEFGG). The Italian sonnet, on the other hand, forces poets to work within stricter limitations. The octet (ABBAABBA) alone requires the poet to find four words for each rhyme, and the sestet (typically CDECDCE or even CDCDCD) means that the Petrarchan sonnet requires far more effort to find multiple rhymes than the English model. (The English sonnet, in fact, can be seen as a way to relieve some of the challenges of importing a rhyme-heavy form into a language with
fewer possible rhyming choices.) Rossetti’s use of the Italian sonnet should be seen as an embrace of the technical restrictions and challenges of the sonnet form; she deliberately chooses the most technically limiting and restricting of the two sonnet types. The requirements of the sonnet form – concision, comfort within a small, confined space, ingenuity in meeting stern requirements, and adaption to a series of conventional and arbitrary limitations – match the disciplined religious activity Rossetti advocates in her devotional prose and poetry alike. Her choice of form reinforces her desire to build a poem, and a self, by pursuing demanding, repetitive restraints.

Turning from structure to texture, it becomes clear that Rossetti’s emphasis on active self-discipline also appears in her markedly repetitive poetic style. A number of critics have noted this repetitive quality: Eric Griffiths refers to her “perpetual variations on sameness” (107), as well as “moments when her verbal needle seems stuck in a groove” (108), and Isobel Armstrong correctly describes Rossetti’s style as “adamantly locked in repetition,” relying on “doubling of words, phrases, patterned iteration and duplication” to “create the spareness of her lyrics” (352). Interpreting what this repetition does, however, proves harder than identifying it. Some scholars, as we have seen, dismiss Rossetti’s emphasis on repetition is a fault in her poetry (Esh 837); Armstrong, less dismissive, argues that the repetition is best seen as a “play with regularity and irregularity” (352), albeit a play that disappears in her later poetry, which “seems to reassert the barrier as limit” (366). The clue to understanding Rossetti’s repetitive style, I believe, lies in her recurring interest in ritual and her embrace of a constraining verse form. Her style replicates on a sentence level what the sonnet does on a generic level: both types of form embrace a conscious strategy of self-discipline. Her repetitive language almost becomes a ritualistic exercise or
devotional practice. As Betty S. Flowers reminds us, Rossetti aspired from a young age to “write a really fine hymn.” This is revealing, Flowers notes, because just as hymns “are characterized by repetition and strict form,” Rossetti’s own poems “are built upon patterns of repetition and depend on close attention to small variations in an otherwise strict form” (173). Rossetti’s style, by embracing a layer of repetition even beyond the sonnet form, ties her poetry closely to the discipline and constraint of the hymn.

Why are sonnets – particularly Rossett’s unusually repetitive sonnets – poems that take a “disciplinary” form? Because they use minute, detailed techniques in order to shape the language being produced. The term “disciplinary” might seem overblown, but the constraints and restraints that the sonnet imposes (and that Rossetti’s deliberately repetitive style embraces) are not far removed from the disciplinary techniques famously described in Foucault’s Discipline and Punish. Repetitive style, for instance, is quite similar to what Foucault calls “exercise,” or “that technique by which one imposes on the body tasks that are both repetitive and different, but always graduated” (161). Deliberate repetition in differing circumstances, in other words, is an imposition of restraint that shapes and molds what might otherwise be relatively freeing (either language, as in poetry, or physical action, as in the body). As a set of minute restrictions, both the formal requirements of the sonnet and the deliberate constraints of repetitive language act as disciplinary procedures that shape and control the language being expressed. The two, of course, do not need to appear in the same poem (there are sonnets that don’t make much use of repetition as a rhetorical device, and there are poems – including Rossetti’s other works – that are not sonnets but extensively use repetition). But each acts as a restraint upon the production of language, and the two found together are strong evidence for the use of the term “discipline” to
describe the style of Rossetti’s sonnets. The use of repetitive technique links Rossetti’s poetry to broader disciplinary concerns; both emphasize deliberate practices that shape a poem or a self. 

Rossetti’s choice of the sonnet for her devotional poetry thus proves to be a shrewd one. Indeed, her devotional sonnets are innovative formal achievements, the product of a writer who discovered an ideal genre for expressing Christian self-discipline and exploited its potential with her addition of a deliberately constrained style. But Rossetti’s accomplishment here is often overlooked, because her rigid orthodoxy and conservatism casts a shadow over the writing. Two assumptions spring from the devout, even ascetic subject matter of her devotional verse. The first assumes that Rossetti’s religious beliefs are outmoded and infers that their form must be as well, and the second equates Rossetti’s religious conservatism with world-weary exhaustion. Neither assumption is warranted. The first is easiest to cure – examining Rossetti’s sonnets makes it clear that her work does not simply mimic the devotional poetry of ages past. The second assumption, one that links Oxford Movement Christianity to exhausted asceticism, may seem more plausible at first glance. But here too, Rossetti’s poetry takes a more interesting approach than mere rejection of the world. Instead, she plays with familiar *topoi* of resignation and despair only to push these ideas in new directions. Rossetti’s devotional sonnets discover surprising new possibilities within these established beliefs and literary genres: their deeply personal emphasis on self-discipline models an intense effort to preserve religious life in a society where the church’s influence had begun to fade. Furthermore, her consistent production of sonnets provides some of the strongest evidence against a split between early and late Rossetti; to help obliterate this distinction, I will begin with a major mid-career sonnet sequence,
“‘They Desire a Better Country’,” included in the expanded version of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* published in 1875. I then turn to the devotional sonnets collected in *Verses*.

As with most of Rossetti’s devotional poetry, “‘They Desire a Better Country’” operates against a background of disgust with secular life. This is the kernel of truth to the argument that Rossetti’s devotional poetry is world-weary; she certainly does reject what she sees as an unsatisfying world. But that hostility drops out of her devotional poetry, replaced with a consistent reminder that her rejection of secular life is merely a preface to the alternative of Christian devotion. The term “desire” serves both as a reminder of the potential erotic possibilities of the sonnet – sexual desire, of course, being deeply intertwined with the love poem – and an indication of the appetites and hungers that animate the believer. And the object of this desire – the “better country” – both validates the desire and introduces the concept of the journey that will become crucial for understanding these three poems. The emphasis in these sonnets is no longer on the inadequacy of worldly life. Instead, Rossetti focuses on the possibilities of a better life, and the activity required to acquire it. Indeed, from the very first line of the first poem, “‘They Desire a Better Country’” signals that it is no longer weary or despondent. Instead of opening with a lamentation, of the sort we might expect from a poem about the turn to religious life, the poem begins with a startling declaration: “I would not if I could undo my past” (1). The defiance and certainty of this first line certainly run counter to the pessimism of earlier sonnets, but the poem does not completely change from these precursors. Her past, and all its “faults and follies” (4), has caused its share of pain and suffering, leading her to a state where her “future is a blank” (2). This poem is not, in other words, Rossetti making use of the *carpe diem* topos. The past may not be something she is willing to abandon, but it is certainly
regrettable. And the speaker does not hesitate to blame herself for the problems that have beset her; she is forthright in declaring that her past is something “for which I have myself to thank” (3). The basic attitude toward secular life, then, remains largely similar – in this poem and others, Rossetti finds very little to praise and much to dislike about the eventual outcome. Nevertheless, her confident declaration in the first line is perhaps unexpected given the stereotype of Rossetti’s devotional poetry as resigned and exhausted. She refuses to indulge any desire to change the past, even if such a thing were possible.

Rossetti makes her confidence clear through an enthusiastic use of exergasia, or repetitive metaphor (Lanham 74), playing with a number of possibilities for expressing the same idea. In fact, the remainder of the octet is taken up by a litany of what the speaker would not do: “cast anew the lot once cast” (5), “launch a second ship for one that sank” (6), “drug with sweets the bitterness I drank” (7), or “break with feasting my perpetual fast” (8). These four lines exemplify the sort of play within repetition that so strongly marks Rossetti’s poetry. The tenor of these metaphors is largely the same – the refusal to try and modify, even if it were possible, the undesirable state of affairs. But the vehicles are subtly different. All emphasize misfortune, but some emphasize chance more than others (casting lots, for instance, in which one can hardly be blamed for losing), and some make the misfortune or suffering seem substantially more virtuous than others, as in the drug and the fast of the last two metaphors. What we see here is a repetition of figurative language that forces readers to contemplate the same idea in several different ways, a practice that encourages the reader to linger on the same idea for an extended period of time. Much like the hymns Rossetti loved, in which repetition leads to pondering an idea for longer than the point of its initial expression, this inventive metaphoric excess causes us
to contemplate the speaker’s insistence. This is quite similar to the disciplinary sort of repetition we will see in her devotional verse, even though it is not about a devotional topic just yet; both make heavy use of repetition to reinforce and encourage a particular insight or perspective. And the sheer excess of this repetition points to the energy that characterizes Rossetti’s religious poetry – it vigorously works within the limitations of the sonnet to emphasize deliberate action.

But why is the speaker so insistent on an unchanged past? Because the choices she has made – and their undesirable consequences – provide the motivation she needs to desire the “better country” of the title. In other words, the regrets and sorrow we see earlier in this poem are the necessary precursors to the hard but rewarding work of religious practice. We see this in the speaker’s explicit consideration of the possibilities open to her. In another use of repetition, she declares that “one remembrance” (10) outweighs several alternatives that a more indulgent life could offer: “a hundred joys” (10) or “a thousand hopes in jubilee” (11), with the second possibility increasing the speaker’s determination by increasing the value of what she refuses by a factor of ten. She is driven on by the “music of one tearful voice” (12), which matters more to her than the life of pleasure and ease she could have with a different past. Continuing to emphasize the poem’s repetition, we learn that this voice “calls and calls to [her]” (13) with the message “Follow me here, rise up, and follow here” (14). The repeated iterations of the same phrases – “calls” and “follow” – serve a slightly different purpose from the exergasia earlier in the poem. Here, the repetition does not emphasize the same idea in slightly different figures, but the exact same words. Both the calling that motivates the speaker and the following that constitutes her journey are repeated in order to account for the repetitive discipline of religious life. Christian activity, for Rossetti, becomes a process of repeated following in response to
recurring calls. The poetic style embodies the repetitive action that Rossetti places at the heart of Christianity as a practice or mode of life; the poem repeats language (with subtle variations at times) just as the devout believer repeats prayers or hymns.

The second sonnet in this sequence moves from a desire for a better country to the active journey there. The qualities of the Christian life that Rossetti emphasizes in *Time Flies* – patience, persistence, and active engagement in religious devotion – are all qualities that the speaker draws upon for her journey. Unlike the pessimistic sort of view that dominated in “One Certainty,” “The World,” and other earlier poems, the speaker does not seem plagued with anguish. She twice declares that she follows – reminding us once again of the specific language that concluded the first poem – “in hope” (16, 17). And when on this journey, she is “persistent more and more” (17), letting the repetition of the term “more” do the work of demonstrating her persistence and discipline. Her hopeful persistence is not the only emotion she feels on this journey, however; instead, this sonnet emphasizes a balance between the desirable end that the speaker pursues and the difficulties that follow on the journey. On one hand, there is the eventual arrival at the “better country” to consider – and the poem stresses that the speaker, determined to reach her goal, wanders with a “golden key to ope the golden door / Of golden home” (20-21). The repetition of “golden” (which we also see in the third sonnet of the sequence, in lines 37-38) links and stresses both the eventual reward of the journey and the means of accessing it, all in two brief lines of verse. On the other hand, the poem does not hide the fact that this journey is a difficult one; the speaker travels with hope, but also “fear” (17), and the journey forces her to cross a “dry desert” (18). The contrasting pairs and repetitions
emphasize both the challenges and benefits of the journey, making it a devotional poem that presents Christian life as one of active work in challenging circumstances.

Perhaps the most intriguing development of this theme in the second sonnet can be found in the final two lines of the poem. Like the heavy stress on “hope” and “golden” earlier in the poem, these lines are largely spent meditating on a single word. But unlike the optimism connoted by “hope” and “golden,” these lines emphasize the more arduous task ahead for the speaker by playing with the word “weep.” The term is introduced as the octet comes to its conclusion, as the speaker confesses that her “eye weepeth sore” (21) because of the difficult journey ahead. But this seemingly pessimistic outburst is modified by the introduction of a personified Love in the sextet (in a reminder of the sonnet form and its origins in Petrarchan love poetry), who travels alongside the speaker toward the “land of light” (26). And the poem concludes by using this personification of Love to repeat the word “weep,” ending on the following lines: “Weeping thou walkest with him; weepeth he?– / Some sobbing weep, some weep and make no sound” (27-28). These lines (the first spoken by an unnamed interlocutor) do more than simply balance the cheerful repetition of “hope” and “golden” with an equally repetitive stress on sorrow and tears. They modify the individual sadness of line twenty-one with an emphasis on shared sorrow, using the repetition to show how the speaker shares her weeping with Love itself. And the final line, while not a direct answer to the rhetorical question posed, emphasizes the different possibilities and permutations within a particular word. Indeed, the repetition of different elements throughout the poem stresses not only the different emotions that will follow the speaker but also the diversity within the hope and sadness, the suffering and the promise alike. The repetitive style, rather than simply hammering home one particular assertion,
serves as Rossetti’s reminder that the challenges and rewards accompanying the religious life are ones that recur, and emphasize continual persistence and endurance through these contrasting emotional states.

By the conclusion of the third sonnet in “‘They Desire a Better Country’,” Rossetti makes it clear that the pessimism and resignation with which she views secular life must be interpreted alongside the benefits that come with Christian faith and practice. Hence the poem concludes on an optimistic note. As in the second sonnet and its paired repetitive words “golden” and “weep,” the third sonnet also pairs two opposing terms that are repeated throughout the final lines of the poem: “golden” and “darkness.” But since this is a sonnet that takes place at a point when the speaker, though not at the end of her journey, has seen the promised “better country” and feels her face “glow with braver cheer” (33), the poem decisively resolves the tension between these two terms. Rossetti structures the sonnet so that it appears, briefly, as though “darkness” wins out against the “golden city” (37) and its “golden walls of home” (38) – she immediately follows this description by talking about sunset, when “darkness falls” (39), and mentioning the “outer darkness burdensome” (40). But the darkness is broken up in favor of the voice calling (in a deliberate repetition of the end of the first poem) “Follow me hither, follow, rise, and come” (42). The different sorts of repetition across these three sonnets encourages the reader to ponder the significance of various stressed terms, from the focus on the call and journey that concludes the first poem to the tension between “golden” aspirations and sorrow in the second, and the eventual triumph over darkness in the final poem. The repetitions throughout the trilogy discipline readers, focusing attention on the motivation for pursuing a Christian life, the challenges and opportunities that come with it, and ultimately on the rewards that seem within
reach. Weariness, “‘They Desire a Better Country’” implies, is only a preliminary stage to the energetic pursuit of a much more desirable goal. The primary emotion guiding Rossetti’s devotional poetry is, as the title suggests, a desire to reach salvation – and a deeply personal determination to achieve that goal.

And while Rossetti’s Christian faith shines through “‘They Desire a Better Country’,” her devotional self-discipline has been deeply marked by the process of secularization she resists. She understands faith as a deeply private, personal affair, not the collective practice of a community. This transformation can be seen in a small but revealing linguistic detail: the pronouns found throughout the poem. The title, borrowed from the New Testament book of Hebrews (Crump 933), emphasizes a collective desire for salvation; its pronoun, “they,” focuses on the religious practice of a group and not an individual. Rossetti, determined to build her devotional poetry on a Biblical foundation, faithfully repeats the pronoun in her title. Yet the first sonnet, as I have mentioned, immediately jettisons the collective focus for a narrower, more intensely personal one. In fact, twelve first-person singular pronouns (but not a single plural pronoun) appear in the first sonnet’s fourteen lines. The second sonnet briefly describes the speaker as part of a collective unit, but it quickly becomes clear that the “us” (25) refers to the poet herself and “Love” (24), only reinforcing the sense of a private spiritual journey. And while the third sonnet does speak of an “us” throughout the poem, it seems probable that it also refers to the speaker, traveling with the allegorical figure of Love. Even as Rossetti inherits the Christian perspective she defends in these sonnets, she views religion as it was increasingly understood under secularization: as an individual set of beliefs, moods, practices, and responses
to the world. The journey toward salvation, as “‘They Desire a Better Country’” describes it, is a personal and private one.

All these characteristics – a deep awareness of the sonnet and its traditions, deliberate play with repetition, and a focus on the individual self embracing a highly disciplined and active Christian life – appear most clearly in “Out of the Deep Have I Called Unto Thee, O Lord,” a sequence of sonnets that introduces Rossetti’s final volume of poetry *Verses* (1893). Although *Verses* gathers the devotional verse scattered across her religious books, it is not simply a compendium of her religious poetry. By reorganizing the poems in this final volume to begin with a sequence of sonnets, and not simply reprinting her poems in the order of their publication, Rossetti makes the disciplinary sonnet into a culmination of her achievement in devotional poetry. Constance Hassett persuasively describes the recurring pattern of these sonnets, cautioning us about assuming that Rossetti’s late devotional poetry is mournful and resigned. Instead, she says, “lamentation is not the only, or even the dominant, mood of the late poems” (209). While the poems certainly recognize the trials that life brings, they are not self-indulgent or miserable. Instead, the “scrupulous and exquisite variations on lyric form” remind the reader that “the hard things are hard and that art gives repeated and time-resistant access to a necessary harmony, courage, and clarity” (237). For Rossetti, it becomes important to recognize life’s difficulties, but this recognition is just an early stage in the process of eager self-discipline. The title of this particular section provides a valuable hint on how to read this poetry; it is borrowed from Psalm 130, which begins with the despairing line that Rossetti uses here but ends with hope for “plenteous redemption.”23 For Rossetti, the problems of life (“depths”), while real,

---

23 Psalm 130:7 (KJV).
are merely obstacles on the road to salvation. And acquiring that salvation comes not by patiently waiting for death but by calling out to God, actively working to transcend the miseries of the world. Rossetti’s devotional objective thus takes an energetic and determined form.

One of the major early sonnets in the volume, “Where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt,” gives a particularly clear look at the active nature of Rossetti’s Christian faith:

Nerve us with patience, Lord, to toil or rest,
Toiling at rest on our allotted level;
Unsnared, unscared by word or flesh or devil,
Fulfilling the good Will of Thy behest:
Not careful here to hoard, not here to revel;
But waiting for our treasure and our zest
Beyond the fading splendour of the west,
Beyond this deathstruck life and deathlier evil.
Not with the sparrow building here a house:
But with the swallow tabernacling so
As still to poise alert to rise and go
On eager wings with wing-outspeeding wills
Beyond earth’s gourds and past her almond boughs,
Past utmost bound of the everlasting hills. (1-14)

The poem begins with a request (that, in its directness, could almost be interpreted as a command): “Nerve us with patience, Lord, to toil or rest, / Toiling at rest on our allotted level” (1-2). The daring choice of language so prominent in Rossetti’s devotional poetry is on
display here with the very first line, as in the unusual verb *nerve* that describes the speaker’s receipt of patience. As we have seen, readers of *Time Flies* would have been familiar with Rossetti’s interest in patience and activity, as in her discussion of life as a race that must be run. We have a similar sort of combination here, where patience is an attribute that enhances the courage and boldness of its receiver. In other words, patience is no longer a quiet state of mind or a passive virtue, but a characteristic of the daring and powerful. We also have the paradox of the speaker pleading for God to grant this sort of courage, which will then be used to better follow and worship God. Activity can only begin with God; the speaker has no power to accomplish this spiritual journey without divine intervention. But just because the speaker needs divine aid to acquire this patience does not mean that she embraces a passive role – the speaker may not be able to acquire this energy on her own, but she is certainly determined to use it once obtained.

The playful repetition of “toil or rest, / Toiling at rest” (1-2) makes the relationship between activity and patience clear. In the first iteration of the phrase, it appears as though these two verbs are a binary pair opposed to one another (a reading reinforced by the term “or” that links them). Rest might still not be as passive as this account makes it appear – after all, for rest to be possible, the speaker needs God to grant patience, and patience has already been associated with energy and daring. But the second use of the phrase makes rest and toil alike seem much more active than they did in the first line. The term “rest” does not appear on its own – instead, it becomes a subset of the more general category “toil.” Even what seems like rest, in other words, should be interpreted as a specific sort of labor or toil. The line break separating the two readings allows the first possibility, one where rest and toil seem to stand on equal footing, to
appear (briefly) as the correct interpretation of the line. But the second line of the poem not only discredits that interpretation, it forces the reader to alter their impression of what has come before – providing a little extra “toil” of its own. By redefining patience as a means to help with toil and by classifying rest as its own sort of labor, the poem makes it clear that active work forms a key part of any Christian life – even the seemingly restful ones.

The sonnet continues to plead for God to grant the energy and power to resist secular life. The poem certainly has no particular admiration for the world, dismissing it as “this deathstruck life and deathlier evil” (8). By repeating the root word “death” twice in one line, and castigating the world as a paradoxical “deathstruck life,” Rossetti stresses the emptiness of what is being abandoned. But the contrast that emerges in the final lines of the poem leaves the reader with a lasting impression of active resistance, not passive resignation. The speaker rejects the example of the “sparrow building here a house” (9), instead preferring the “swallow tabernacling so / As still to poise alert to rise and go / On eager wings with wing-outspeeding wills” (10-12). The words “alert” and “eager” certainly indicate that Rossetti’s rejection of secular life is not dejected but active. And the repetition in line twelve of “wing” changes our focus from death to flight – more specifically, to the physical object that makes an ascent to the heavens possible. The stress on “will” at the end of line twelve reinforces this interpretation, stressing active resistance to worldly life rather than a vague hope for salvation. Though the speaker acknowledges that rejecting the world requires the aid of God, this should not be misinterpreted as resignation or despair – the poem instead looks forward to bravely casting off the constraints of the world in order to eagerly pursue Christian faith. Fittingly for a devotional poem, the speaker casts Christian belief and rejection of secular life as a bold, daring choice.
“As sparks fly upward,” the sonnet immediately following “Where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt,” continues Rossetti’s emphasis on the active side of Christian self-discipline. As in the previous poem, the speaker begins with a prayer that God grant her something she does not have: “Lord, grant us wills to trust Thee with such aim / Of hope and passionate craving of desire” (1-2). Once again, Rossetti’s use of the imperative mood in the first line blurs the line between request and command; her emphatic “grant us” is a forceful plea for faith. Significantly, the term “will” reappears here; the speaker’s plea is not for unthinking submission but for a clear determination to persist in religious faith. The effect of these lines is to reframe trust in God as a conscious product of the will, not a simple statement of belief or rejection of the self’s powers. It is also worth noting that neither “hope” nor “passionate craving of desire” (2) are compatible with the resignation or weariness that Rossetti’s poetry is often thought to contain. Instead, these phrases indicate the poem’s enthusiastic and vigorous belief in a better life. Along those lines, the word “aim” (1) emerges as an important indicator of Rossetti’s attitude. Aim connotes intention and purpose, as in seeking a target or goal, characteristics that are hardly compatible with a passive sort of faith. In this poem, as in its predecessor, Christian belief is recast as the product of conscious choice (albeit the sort of choice made possible through divine aid), one made in a process that repeats across time “yesterday, this day, day by day the Same” (5). The poem’s focus remains on repeated, self-disciplined activity – not on the weariness that accompanies the world but instead on the future to come.

From here, the speaker begins to explain why Christian devotion is so compatible with vigor and activity. As she tells it, a faithful will continually aims at the divine. And once again we get the repetition that is so characteristic of Rossetti’s poetry: the will that seeks God, she
tells us, will let us “mount aspiring, and aspire / Still while we mount” (3-4). By repeating both “mount” and “aspire” (and by reversing their position in the sentence, making it seem as though each is the more important verb in turn), Rossetti makes it clear that hope and aspiration go hand in hand with the sort of progress that the speaker aims to achieve. At this point the analogy from the title returns; human beings are likened to sparks that “fly upward scaling heaven by fire” (6) that “still mount and still attain not” (7). The spark analogy is an intriguing one – while the spark has no will of its own, unlike the Christian believer of the previous lines, the spark certainly implies energy. Even if the emphasis on will has receded from earlier in the poem, the emphasis on active movement has not. And the repetition of the phrases “mount” and “aspire” do more than simply call attention to the theme of the poem; they themselves are vigorous verbs, insisting on their presence in the poem and reinforcing the sense of activity we see revealed in the metaphor of the spark. This sense of activity remains, along with the sense of will and conscious choice, when the poem concludes by clarifying the analogy. When saints “mount” (9), the speaker tells us, they “have set their face / Onward and upward toward that blessèd place / Where man rejoices with his God” (10-12). “Set their face,” of course, implies conscious determination; the poem thus concludes by re-emphasizing how “mounting” to heaven, for the Christian, is an accomplishment, not simply the product of a passive life. It is entirely appropriate, then, that the poem concludes with the race analogy Rossetti uses so frequently; the “spark” traveling to heaven becomes a “victor at the goal” (14). While Rossetti introduces the spark metaphor in order to emphasize energy, she returns to the image of the race – and its determined, hard-working victor – to highlight the activity Christian life demands.
And despite their piety, secularization leaves its mark on “Where neither rust nor moth
doeth corrupt” and “As sparks fly upward.” Rossetti’s devotional verse is not secular in any sense
of the word; it is intensely Christian, devoted to a religious understanding of the world, and
convinced that nothing but the worst awaits those who reject faith. Nevertheless, her poetry is
also intensely personal, indicating that her understanding of religion has largely left the public
sphere behind. As the deliberate culmination of her devotional career, Verses leaves no doubt
that Rossetti understood Christianity as a personal faith, not a belief that holds a community
together. As with “‘They Desire a Better Country’,” “Where neither rust ...” and “As sparks fly
upward” reveal an intensely individualistic, private view of faith. Both poems use the plural
pronoun “us” rather than “I,” as though speaking for a community, but no real evidence of a
believing community appears in either poem. Instead, both poems describe the Christian life as
one where individual believers are called to leave their old ties behind as they move toward
salvation. Even as “Where neither rust ...” prays for the strength to “toil or rest” (1), for instance,
Rossetti encourages the reader to reject ties to an earthly community. We are told not to “hoard”
because we are “not here to revel” (5); instead, the Christian should be “alert to rise and go” (11)
at any time. This emphasis on individuality over community reappears in “As sparks fly
upward ...” – in fact, the central metaphor of the poem implies that humans are individual,
atomized sparks moving on their own, without other communal ties. The community of
humanity reconciled to God, as the poem indicates, comes only after life is over. In this world,
Rossetti implies, religious belief requires personal self-discipline.

But while faith may be an individual, sometimes lonely journey, Rossetti argues that it is
exhilarating, not exhausting. Even when Verses turns to death for the first time in the volume, in
the poem “It is not death, O Christ, to die for Thee,” the sonnets never embrace the resigned perspective that critics often ascribe to this poetry. Part of Rossetti’s achievement, as before, is stylistic; the forceful and virtuosic use of repetition so common in Rossetti’s best sonnets undercuts any perceived weariness in the poem’s content. Repetition in this poem serves to emphasize the subtle differences in perception and thought – in fact, more than many of Rossetti’s other poems, each repetition forces the reader to reconsider what has come before. The first line, for example, insists on death’s importance, only to redefine its meaning. The flat refusal found in this first line – death is not death – signals that Rossetti is not writing a resigned or exhausted poem. Instead, we see a pattern of repetition and revision throughout the poem – for instance, when Rossetti declares that Christ is “more lovely than the lovely band / Of saints who worship Thee on either hand” (6-7), the repetition of “lovely” spreads the attribute from the worshippers to the object of worship all at once. It is not superfluous repetition, but rather a qualification that enriches our knowledge of how God and believer are related. We see this as well in her declaration that Christ is both “loving and loved” (8) – the use of the same word forces readers to explore the subtle differences between the different forms, and it draws a tight connection between subject (the believers who love Christ) and object (Christ, who reciprocates this love). The repetition, as in Rossetti’s best poems, is resourceful, demanding that the reader explore the subtleties and nuances of language in order to understand the beliefs that the poem extols – in other words, it creates additional work for the reader, emphasizing activity over passive comprehension. The tight repetitions of the poem come to a climax as the poem begins the concluding sextet, where Rossetti begins with a blunt declaration that “death is not death, and therefore do I hope: / Nor silence silence” (9-10). Repetition has even extended to outright
paradox – the force of Christian doctrine is such, in this poem, that death and silence become the opposite of what they conventionally mean.

Appropriately for a poem that makes use of Rossetti’s deliberately repetitive style, we see once again her characteristic turn from pessimism to optimism. In fact, the “pessimism” of this poem is particularly slight – death and silence are certainly recurring motifs in the beginning of the poem, but they are immediately denied and transformed within the very first line. Building on this transformation of convention, Rossetti concludes by announcing that, since death and silence are radically transformed, “I therefore sing / A very humble hopeful quiet psalm” (10-11). This sort of voice – quiet but assertive, an optimistic expression of the will that extols the virtues of the Christian life – is exactly the sort of voice found elsewhere in Rossetti’s poetry. And the poem ends with a vivid description of Rossetti’s offering: “A handful of sun-courting heliotrope, / Of myrrh a bundle, and a little balm” (13-14). The sonnet has shed any sort of pessimism or weariness – instead, it concludes with confident, eager praise for the devout life that Rossetti finds much more fulfilling than the exhausting life of the world. As in her devotional sonnets more generally, the poem is only pessimistic as a precursor to the enthusiastic, active work of religious devotion. The quietness of the poetic voice should not keep us from hearing the determination and vigor of its song.

As these readings suggest, Rossetti’s devotional sonnets are far more active and vigorous than their reputation suggests. Christian life, in these poems, becomes a life of energetic self-discipline, not exhausted, pious resignation. What might be more surprising, however, is the value that these late poems have for understanding Rossetti’s earlier, seemingly secular poetry. I will suggest, perhaps paradoxically, that Rossetti’s devotional sonnets become an ideal way to
read her early work – even such wildly different works as her most famous poem of all, “Goblin
Market.” On the surface, the poems could hardly seem less alike; in turning to devotional poetry,
Rossetti exchanges narrative for lyric, expansive length for brevity, and whimsy for sober-
minded Christian theology. Nevertheless, “Goblin Market” proves surprisingly amenable to an
interpretation focusing on Rossetti’s poetics of self-discipline. In a very different poetic mode,
“Goblin Market” examines, thematically and formally, many of the same problems that
preoccupy Rossetti in her devotional sonnets. In other words, we might well benefit from
reversing the process of literary history and reading “Goblin Market” through the lens of
Rossetti’s devotional verse. Focusing on Rossetti’s poetic and religious self-discipline helps us
understand two recurring interpretive issues surrounding “Goblin Market”: Lizzie’s peculiar
“redemptive” role in the narrative and the poem’s play with metaphorical excess.

For although “Goblin Market” has been widely and plausibly interpreted as a Christian
allegory, part of its interest lies in how the poem resists a simple “decoding.” One of the central
mysteries, as Simon Humphries has recently noted, is the goblin fruit itself, which acts as “a
poison that cures” (392). Humphries persuasively interprets this puzzle in light of the Oxford
Movement’s emphasis on the Eucharist, arguing that the fruit represents a tension between a
“sacramental” view of the world where “the things of the world are good when used rightly” and
a rival view where “the things of the world will entrap and must therefore be rejected” (403).
Just as the Eucharist is something that “can have the power sometimes to bring life, sometimes to
bring death” (Humphries 392), the effects of the goblin fruit vary widely depending on
circumstance. But it is worth noting that Lizzie is not a pious believer taking the sacrament. She
does not consume the goblin fruit or its juices – its juices simply cover “all her face” (434) and
provide a restorative meal for Laura. Even when Laura devours the “goblin pulp and goblin
dew” (470), Lizzie never consumes any of the fruit herself. Nor does she acquire the fruit as
Laura does; while the virtuous and sinful Christian consumes the Eucharist in the exact same
outward manner, Lizzie refuses to eat the fruit with the goblins and resists their violent assault.
If this particular meal of goblin fruit allegorically represents the Eucharist, why does Lizzie’s
experience vary so greatly from Laura’s?

Instead of focusing on what the fruit itself represents, I suggest we examine how the
fruit is acquired. Laura obtains the fruit by offering payment in the form of a “golden
curl” (125), sacrificing part of her own body. Furthermore, her consumption of the fruit is
greedy and intemperate; Rossetti describes Laura’s meal – “she sucked and sucked and sucked
the more” (134) – by stressing her repetitive, voracious consumption. Lizzie, on the other hand,
refuses to modify her behavior in order to get the fruit. She makes a straightforward offer to the
goblins – a penny for their fruit – and refuses to eat it there with them. This provokes a spiritual
trial of resistance, which Lizzie does not fail to note when she returns to Laura. Lizzie tells her
sister that she “braved the glen” (473) to obtain the juices for her; the fruit can save Laura, in
other words, only because Lizzie undergoes a difficult process in order to get it. Laura’s fruit is
obtained easily, while Lizzie’s comes from standing “in deadly peril” (558). Redemption, then,
can only be obtained in “Goblin Market” by a process of active resistance: the determination to
seek out the goblins, the willpower to resist eating their fruit, the ability to keep “lip from
lip” (431) closed while being beaten, kicked, and bruised, and, finally, the strength to outlast the
energy of one’s antagonists. If Lizzie’s ability to redeem Laura were simply a product of her
spiritual purity, she would have been able to purchase (and eat) the fruit as the virtuous Christian
takes the Eucharist. Instead, not only does Lizzie suffer in obtaining the fruit, she never eats any herself; while the Eucharist is a sacrament that brings the Christian closer to God, Lizzie never has any reason to eat the goblin fruit. Its purpose, for Lizzie, is to highlight Rossetti’s connection between Christian virtue and active self-discipline.

Even the initial moment of “sin” in the poem – Laura’s decision to eat the goblin fruit – can be understood through Rossetti’s insistence on Christian discipline. The decisive moment triggering Laura’s downfall comes when she fails to follow Lizzie, who had prudently “thrust a dimpled finger / In each ear, shut eyes and ran” (67-68). Instead, Laura makes a poor decision – she “chose to linger” (69) by the goblins. The word “linger” is revealing. Laura does not actually approach the goblins; she simply waits in the area nearby, and the goblins come to “where Laura was” (91). Her initial mistake, then, is not that she seeks out the goblins, but simply that she remains inactive and lets the goblins come to her. And when she returns home, Lizzie does not initially reproach her for eating the fruit (in fact, Lizzie does not even answer Laura when Laura tells her that she “ate and ate [her] fill” (165)). Lizzie’s “wise upbraidings” (142) focus on her decision to stay in the glen. The verb that appears twice in Lizzie’s reprimand, significantly, is “loiter” (145, 162); her brief moral after she reminds Laura of Jeanie’s fate is not “do not eat goblin fruit” but “you should not loiter so” (162). We should remember that Rossetti would later declare in *Time Flies* that sloth is the deadliest of all sins because it opposes energy, which can always become useful. Just as Lizzie’s active resistance makes her able to redeem her sister, Laura’s initial error comes not from curiosity but her choice to loiter or linger. “Goblin Market” thus emerges, perhaps surprisingly, as a parable warning about the dangers of indolence.
Stylistically as well as thematically, “Goblin Market” explores the benefits of self-discipline. As Isobel Armstrong has argued, “Goblin Market” is a poem where “overflow and resistance, expression and repression, create one another” (363). Building on Rossetti’s religious writing, we might put this insight another way: the repression that defines self-discipline channels and focuses expression. We have seen how the poem casts Laura’s sin as the product of sloth and Lizzie’s redemptive act as a disciplined struggle. We can now examine how the language and meter of “Goblin Market” reinforce this emphasis on channeled, disciplined activity. The irregular verse of “Goblin Market” is unique in her poetry; even the other long poems in her corpus (“The Prince’s Progress,” “From House to Home,” and so on) tend to use much more regular verse forms. But while the poem constantly flirts with a breakdown in rhyme or meter, it never becomes free verse; although no regular pattern of rhyme emerges in the poem, most lines rhyme with another nearby line. Smaller patterns of rhyme appear, adding local bits of order to the poem to counter the lack of a set rhyme scheme. The appearance of embedded ballad stanzas (“Evening by evening / Among the brookside rushes, / Laura bowed her head to hear, / Lizzie veiled her blushes” (32-35)) or couplets (“Crouching close together / In the cooling weather” (36-37)) fights against the irregularity of the poem as a whole. We might think of the poem’s playful experiment with rhyme as a corollary to Lizzie’s own behavior, flirting with the loss of restraint even while working hard to discipline and contain itself. The recurring and shifting use of rhyme imposes the order that the poem threatens to lose.

24 Perhaps the closest example to “Goblin Market”’s disorder is “‘The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children’,” a poem that similarly experiments with irregular rhyme. Even here, though, the experimentation is not quite as extensive or obvious.
The sense of play within discipline that we see in the rhyme scheme also appears in “Goblin Market”’s use of simile. In fact, the poem repeats possible similes the same way that Rossetti’s sonnets repeat individual words: as a strategy for multiplying the possibilities contained in individual moments. The poem is full of passages where the speaker offers a number of similes, as follows:

Like a rush-imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch
When its last restraint is gone. (82-86)

This is only the first of several moments where the poem offers a heap of similes when seemingly one would do; other examples include lines 185-191, 409-421, 500-506, and 513-521. Nor are similes the only example of stylistic repetition and excess; the poem is full of catalogs describing elements of the story world in exhaustive detail. In fact, the first lines of the poem set the tone with a long list of the fruit the goblins offer. All these different repetitions are irrelevant or superfluous from a narratological perspective – the descriptions, for instance, stop the story in its tracks. Nor does the heavy use of simile add much, it seems, to any interpretation of the poem; while some differences can undoubtedly be seen between the similes clustering together in the poem, they are small and largely inconsequential. Their presence can best be explained as a demonstration of the energies and resources within the limits of the poem. The repetition of description or figurative language functions by calling attention to itself, stressing the sense of possibility that emerges within the poem. Just as rhyme in “Goblin Market” plays with the
possibilities of restraint, the figurative language and description push against the narrative requirements of the poem. As in her sonnets, and in the spiritual trial that Laura and Lizzie undergo, Rossetti explores the energy and possibility contained within self-restraint and discipline.

“Goblin Market” thus demonstrates that it is not just Rossetti’s religious sonnets that can be called a poetry of self-discipline. In fact, Rossetti’s exploration of repetition and energetic work within restraint can be seen in her most popular poetry. This suggests that we can no longer comfortably divide Rossetti’s career in half, cleanly separating her late religious verse from her earlier, more canonical poetry. Indeed, Rossetti’s underlying interest in disciplining the self and the poem alike tells us that, if we wish to see what the Victorians found so compelling in her poetry, we need to read her devotional verse again. The devotional sonnets of her late career offer a chance to see her interest in discipline, a guiding value of her poetry and Christianity alike, in its clearest form. Furthermore, the theological and poetic attitude that emerges in this late work also makes a useful guide through the complexities of her early poetry. By leaving Rossetti’s devotional work on the shelf, we miss some accomplished and memorable poetry and develop a misguided view of Rossetti’s work as a whole. To avoid these problems, we must learn what Rossetti’s own contemporaries knew – her devotional poems, far from being just a postscript to her career, should be seen as a culmination of the values present in her work all along.

Perhaps surprisingly, then, Rossetti emerges as a poet whose project is not far removed from the other writers we have examined so far. Like them, Rossetti shares a conviction that literature, with one foot in aesthetics and the other in the subject matter it examines, can bridge
the gap between different fields and create new connections in place of the ones modernity severed. And like them, Rossetti’s poetry makes form the bridge that spans both fields, linking both Christian faith and poetic tradition to her exploration of self-discipline. Where she differs, of course, is in her intense reaction against secularization. While Trollope and Browning seek to find new ways of connecting religious and aesthetic spheres that keep a place for faith while acknowledging the great changes secularization has made, and Eliot, Swinburne, and Webster envision a world with agnostic or pagan foundations, Rossetti remains committed to a view of the world that puts religion at the center of social life. For these other writers, secularization is a welcome development; for Rossetti, it is a genuine disaster. Her poetry responds to this crisis by looking for ways to retain Christian piety in a secularizing world. Her emphasis on self-discipline, desire, and personal piety, as well as her use of the lyric voice, indicates that she understands that religion’s role as the unifying element in the public sphere is over – the privatization of religion, in her poetry, will not be reversed. Consequently, she emphasizes individual faith and discipline as a way to maintain Christianity’s importance in a world where its public role has been transformed. For a devout believer like Rossetti, devotional poetry and prose become particularly important in a world where religion’s place cannot be taken for granted.

Rossetti’s devotional poetry, working to build a poetic mode of Christian self-discipline that can survive under secularization, thus refutes any simplistic “decline of faith” narrative about Victorian religion. And whether we find her views palatable or not, her intensely personal Christianity occupies an important place in the landscape of religion after secularization. Certainly, her work stands apart from the authors I have examined previously; she does not
assume, like Trollope or Browning, that Christianity should simply “modernize” and change in response to secularization. Nor, of course, does she embrace secularization’s threat to religion, as Eliot, Swinburne, and Webster do. But nor does she take the fundamentalist path and attack modernity itself. Instead, she accepts the social processes that push religion increasingly into the private sphere. And in a way, the sonnet once again proves the perfect resource for Rossetti’s devotional project. As religion’s place in society becomes increasingly constrained and circumscribed, relegated to the sphere of private feeling, she adopts a restrained, personal, and restricted genre to explore the possibilities that remain. Her poetry, celebrating a disciplined Christian life, holds out hope for a quiet but thriving faith nestled within the private sphere. Both in her choice of genre and her acceptance of religion’s increasing individualism, Rossetti becomes one of Wordsworth’s nuns, happily living in the “Convent’s narrow room” (1). Her devotional poetry hopes to teach readers how to do the same.
Conclusion: Literature in a Secularizing World

The pattern emerging from these chapters has shown, I hope, that religion’s role in Victorian literature cannot be understood with simple truisms like the “decline of faith.” The writers we have examined do not agree on anything about religion’s place in the world; the positions they take range from devout Christianity or ambivalent belief to agnosticism and overt antitheism. We flatten out the diversity of the Victorian period if we locate secularization’s influence in a particular theological stance. Instead, we need to look for secularization’s impact on literary form itself— in the structures and textures of the literary work. Questions of form and aesthetics, in other words, can only be understood by reference to the process of secularization. With social spheres becoming increasingly autonomous and isolated, literature and religion seek to discover the functions they can serve and the limitations that restrict their development. And here the diversity of Victorian literature rests upon a common unity: writers turn to form and genre in order to cope with the problems and opportunities of secularization. They seek to turn their novels and poems into “switching stations,” in Habermas’s words, allowing their work to serve aesthetic or artistic ends even as it theorizes the religious crisis around them. In Victorian literature, form emerges as both the source of literariness and an embodiment, to use Arthur Danto’s apt term, of the ideas in the work. Form works against the isolation of social spheres, bridging the gap between religious and artistic activity created by differentiation.

Victorian literature’s active response to secularization should challenge our understanding of the interpretive methods we use to make sense of texts. It reminds us, first, that literature cannot be treated as something merely symptomatic of larger cultural phenomena. There has been a growing sense in literary studies that the interpretive model stressing critique first and
foremost has begun, to use Bruno Latour’s phrase, to run out of steam. New formalists have argued that something is lost by treating literary texts solely in terms of their content, ignoring form as either irrelevant or, worse, ideologically suspect. Eve Sedgwick’s distinction between “paranoid” and “reparative” reading challenges the imbalance in literary studies where the former, she argues, has become almost the sole mode of academic criticism. Derek Attridge calls us to remember what he calls the “singularity of literature,” insisting on literature’s value in terms both new (alterity, singularity) and old (inventiveness, originality). Most recently, Rita Felski’s *The Uses of Literature* argues for literature’s capability to “promote a heightened awareness of the density and distinctiveness of particular life-worlds” (46), its power to shape how we understand the world. Though these projects differ in important ways, they share a common conviction that literature has something to offer readers, some function other than wrapping dubious political views in attractive packaging.

I sympathize with the aims of all these projects, but I would argue that none go far enough in reshaping how we understand literature. These arguments, as Marjorie Levinson notes, react against an “institutional monopoly” (560) in literature departments that downplays the role of form or aesthetics in critical interpretation. Consequently, they can be criticized by unsympathetic critics like Levinson for never developing “a critique of either the premises or defining practices of historical reading” (560). This line of attack is, I think, somewhat misguided; there is no reason that a richer interpretation of literature focusing on the role of form or aesthetics should be incompatible with historical reading. History is here to stay, and the most recent return to formalism has no interest in rejecting it. To name just a few examples from the seminal collection *Reading for Form* (first published in 2000 in *Modern Language Quarterly*):
Heather Dubrow insists on an “intimacy between form and content” even as she resists “inviting in the formal only as a guest of the concerns of contemporary criticism” (97); J. Paul Hunter demonstrates that “formal analysis ... can be an important tool for baring historical practices that have become obscured or even invisible to us” (149); Garrett Stewart claims that formalism shows us “the permutations by which a novel’s textual surface lets its political unconscious come up for narrative air” (257); and Susan Wolfson, speaking as editor of the collection, declares that “actions of form are embedded in, and even exercise agency within, networks of social and historical conditions” (12). The return to form is not a departure from history. But Levinson is right to claim that formalist critics need more than an argument that contemporary critical practice is imbalanced. The challenge ahead is demonstrating how form and artistic ends matter to our reading of literary texts, without losing our hold on the real gains historicism has brought or writing a purely reactive sort of literary theory. The solution, I argue, lies in understanding how history leads us to problems of form and aesthetics that cannot be dismissed or easily resolved. Secularization theory tells us that insufficient attention to form and aesthetics also means insufficient attention to history. Put simply, we cannot understand literature without studying how these problems of genre, technique, and purpose emerge as a response to differentiation.

Certainly, theories of secularization and differentiation have immediate implications for critical practice in literary studies. Differentiation’s interest in autonomous social spheres calls us to reexamine, against the grain of contemporary critical trends, questions of autonomy in literature. Certainly, autonomy has declined in literary studies for good reasons. Almost nobody in literary studies or art theory claims that literature should be understood in purely aesthetic
terms: since the end of the New Criticism, literary scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that social content cannot be banished from our understanding of literature. Meanwhile, philosophy of art, Robert Stecker claims, has developed a general consensus that understanding art means understanding “the ineliminability of reference to function and history” and “the importance of both intention and institution” (48). As both the theoretical arguments of my introduction and the close readings of my chapters demonstrate, I think this consensus in literary studies and philosophy of art is sound. If Victorian literature aims to establish itself as a bridge between social spheres, linking artistic and religious discourse through its formal properties, any focus on “pure aesthetics” is misguided. But even if theories of literature that stress autonomy overstate their case, the problem of autonomy remains crucial for a simple reason: nineteenth-century writers themselves puzzled over the problems of literature’s autonomy and specific function. All the writers we have examined reflect on the purpose of literature, thinking of ways to speak about their religious subject matter without compromising the artistic merit of their work. Hence while “pure autonomy” has proven to be a dead end in literary theory, Victorian novelists and poets insist on some sort of distinction that separates their writing from other texts in the world. Instead of simply rejecting the belief in autonomous art, secularization and differentiation theory calls us to study just how literature approaches the world around it while defending its own specialized functions. While we should not aim for what Levinson, with obvious distaste, calls a “backlash new formalism” that argues for “a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature” (559), secularization theory shows us that partly differentiated fields, if not “sharply” separated, cannot be easily lumped together.
Hence secularization theory reminds us that the work of crafting a literary text has a challenge we tend to underestimate: the problem of letting art and society, form and content work together effectively. Of course, the argument that literature serves artistic and ideological or rhetorical ends at once is nothing new. The differentiation thesis, though, reminds us to go past the banal conclusion that literature is both art and rhetoric all at once. It indicates that literature’s ability to bridge the gap between these activities – to become what Habermas calls a “switching station” – is a complex achievement. Literature makes a sustained and difficult effort to think seriously about multiple fields at once, instead of simply pouring thematic material into a formal container. In short, secularization makes the interaction between different social spheres, the relationship between form and content, problems to be solved instead of unremarkable attributes of a literary text. Writers must acknowledge the distinctions between fields even as they work to connect them. Their task is not just offering an interesting perspective on the world or masterfully using language to aesthetic ends, but instead is also crafting a form that mediates between artistic and religious spheres. The implications for critical practice here are immense; for instance, just as writers must balance a number of social spheres at once, scholars of literature must understand their subject by looking for connections between the history of genres and forms and broader social history. Secularization theory implies that we must take on a challenge shared by novelists, poets, and playwrights: connecting modes of knowledge without dissolving them into a homogenous blend of “discourse” or “textuality.”

But Victorian literature does not just avoid the methodological dead ends of extreme formalism or historicism. It also rises to meet the challenge of modernity in ways that remain vital long after its own historical moment. For we, along with nineteenth-century literature,
continue to face the problems of modernity: secularization, the rise of modern science, political upheaval, industrialization, and so on permeate the twenty-first century as well as Victorian novels and poetry. To a great extent, we live in the world that the Victorians created. But as we have seen, modernity is not just a topic addressed by nineteenth-century literature; it is also a historical movement that challenges writers’ understanding about what literature can do and should be. The consistent pattern we have seen emerging in these novelists and poets, the decision to use form and genre to reach across differentiating social spheres, is not just a mechanism for integrating material from the religious sphere into literary forms of writing. It is also an effort to ameliorate the problems of modernity – atomization, fragmentation, the increasing inaccessibility of many social spheres – without losing its benefits (increasing autonomy, specialization, advances in clarity and focus). The formal ingenuity and experimentation we have seen throughout this study, then, should be understood as a sort of meta-commentary on modernity, acknowledging the distinction between fields that differentiation brings but insisting that it can mediate between these fields. Victorian literature aims to create connections without losing distinctions, fighting against the problems modernity brings while attempting to preserve its advantages.

Nineteenth-century literature, in its response to the dangers and promises of modernity, makes a cultural contribution that cannot be reduced to an ideological position found in a given text. It offers a subtle answer to the questions secularization poses, looking to preserve the gains of modernity while working against the newer dangers that accompany it. While Victorian literature accepts its new distinctive position, and the increasing autonomy that comes with it, it does not accept the deliberate loss of rhetorical or didactic power often associated with so-called
“pure aesthetics.” Instead, it pursues the expressive or imaginative capacities of literary writing and fuses them with thematic and formal discourse – what Arthur Danto has called “first- and second-order contents” (149) – about the world around it. In other words, Victorian literature aims to save the gains of differentiation while maintaining communication between distinct social spheres. It pursues the “tortuous routes along which science, morality, and art communicate with one another” (Habermas II.398), keeping the advantages of modernity – increasing autonomy and clarity of purpose – while rejecting or fighting against the isolation of social spheres that comes with it. Indeed, it does so even as the process of modernity begins to accelerate, challenging Habermas’s claim that this sort of mediating art is exclusively “post-avant-garde” (II.398); the Victorians, in this sense, were “post-modern” before modernism itself.

Whatever the individual positions these writers take on literature and religion – and, as we have seen, they differ wildly – they share a common approach to handling the problems of differentiation and secularization. Alongside the diversity of these different experiments in linking literature and religious discourse, these novelists and poets take a common path through the bewildering maze of a differentiated society, communicating between differentiated social spheres without rejecting the process as a whole.

Of course, this shared approach to addressing differentiation does not outweigh the details of how each writer responds to secularization and religion’s place in the world – or the need to carefully assess the merits and drawbacks of each “experimental” response. And while I argue that Victorian literature’s response to modernity should not be overlooked as we evaluate the texts we read, I would not claim that this rich mode of handling differentiation overrides a judicious assessment of a novel or poem’s particular view of religion. Fredric Jameson’s claim
in *The Political Unconscious*, arguing that we must aim for a “simultaneous recognition of the ideological and Utopian functions of the artistic text” (299), remains a persuasive one. Although Felski, Sedgwick, and others make a convincing case that we have lost Jameson’s “simultaneous recognition” by stressing the ideological, there is no reason to address this imbalance by ignoring serious charges against political or religious positions. Any literary work worth taking seriously deserves to have its view of the world taken seriously as well – and that means fairly responding to its virtues and vices, its genuine insights as well as its ideological lapses or errors of judgment. Even so, Victorian literature’s effort to solve the problems of differentiation and secularization, its work at communicating between social spheres without rejecting differentiation and its real benefits, has a value of its own. This value cannot be reduced to the particular religious or political views espoused by any given text. Whatever flaws or virtues those views contain, we must remember how Victorian literature experiments with partial differentiation in order to embody the content of religious fields within a literary text. In short, we need to understand the challenge that these texts face, and the imaginative, experimental solutions they develop in response.

Literature thus takes on a playful function – it emerges as a space that connects the artistic sphere and the spheres of religion, politics, ethics, science, and so on. It experiments, as we have seen, with using form and genre to bridge the gap between these different modes of activity. Lest this argument be dismissed as an unfashionably Arnoldian defense of literature, I present two quotations from very different critics that might challenge our views of literature and culture:
... the aim which is the great aim of culture, the aim of setting ourselves to ascertain what perfection is and to make it prevail ... seeking the determination of this question through all the voices of human experience which have been heard upon it, art, science, poetry, philosophy, history, as well as religion, in order to give a greater fulness and certainty to its solution. (35-6)

... culture, from Schiller and Hegel on (and as late as Eliot), is pre-eminently the space of mediation between society or everyday life and art as such. Culture is the place where these dimensions interact in either direction ... If one sees this ambiguous space as mediation, as the greatest artists have always done, then the social pole of culture stands not only as content and raw material, it also offers the fundamental context in which art, even in its modernist form as the Absolute – especially in its modernist form as the Absolute – has a genuine function to redeem and transfigure a fallen society. (177-178)

The first quotation is from *Culture and Anarchy*, from Matthew Arnold, Victorian liberal, defender of “high art,” believer in poetry’s ability to replace religion. The second is from a book of criticism published century and a half later: *A Singular Modernity* by Fredric Jameson, Marxist and relentless scrutinizer of the ideological problems lurking in the high cultural works Arnold praised. These critics have little in common, and, I assume, would not be particularly happy to be linked together. Yet both insist on two similar ideas in the passage above: the complex and messy relationship between literature and the social spheres that modernity sharply differentiates, and the need to mediate between these different areas of human thought in order to
think through the problems of our world (a position they share, as it happens, with Habermas’s theory of communicative action). While we cannot and should not collapse these very different writers into one shared “position” on modernity, the overlap emerging across these very different projects is striking: Arnold the liberal humanist, Jameson the Marxist, and Habermas the ambivalent defender of modernity all see the importance in a cultural space that mediates between social spheres or human activity without erasing the distinctions that these spheres have acquired. Victorian literature, as I hope to have demonstrated, is itself this cultural space that mediates between partially differentiated fields. It is, as Arnold’s “The Study of Poetry” puts it, “thought and art in one” (341).

This response to secularization – this act of incorporating multiple social spheres into a literary text – gives Victorian literature a lasting interest and power that cannot be understood through ideological critique alone. For we live, as Charles Taylor aptly puts it, in a secular age; we have inherited the challenges of modernity that the Victorians faced. We too are faced with the increasing complexity and autonomy of social spheres from science to ethics, the rise of secularization and the number of religious positions opened up in response, the fragmentation of social unities, and the freedom and isolation that autonomy brings. We face the problems and possibilities of modernity just as the Victorians did, and we face the same challenge: to make our way through these losses and gains as we experiment with making a better world. Consequently, we can learn from the experiences of those who faced these challenges before us. It is our good fortune that the Victorians, living when all that was solid seemed to be melting into air, embarked on an extraordinary range of formal and generic experiments to preserve literature’s unique powers without losing its connection to the world around it.
Works Cited


Dillane, Fionnuala. “Re-Reading George Eliot’s ‘Natural History’: Marian Evans, ‘the People,’ and the Periodical.” Victorian Periodicals Review 42.3 (Fall 2009): 244-266.


Houston, Natalie M. “Order and Interpretation in Augusta Webster’s Portraits.” *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 47 (August 2007).


King, Amy M. “Natural History of the Novel: Dilatoriness and Length and the Nineteenth-Century Novel of Everyday Life.” *Novel* 42.3 (Fall 2009): 460-466.


Saville, Julia F. “Cosmopolitan Republican Swinburne, the Immersive Poet as Public Moralist.” 

Victorian Poetry 47.4 (Winter 2009): 691-713.

Scheinberg, Cynthia. “‘The Beloved Ideas Made Flesh’: Daniel Deronda and Jewish Poetics.”

ELH 77.3 (Fall 2010): 813-839.


