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## **The Gendered Soul: Victorian Women Autobiographers and the Novel**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Robbie E Spivey entitled "The Gendered Soul: Victorian Women Autobiographers and the Novel." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

David Goslee, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Amy Billone, Dawn Coleman, David Lee

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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The Gendered Soul:  
Victorian Women Autobiographers and the Novel

A Dissertation Presented for  
the Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Robbie E. Spivey  
December 2010

## Abstract

This project considers ways mid-Victorian fictional autobiographies created new models for women's spiritual formation, testing Nancy Armstrong's theory that novels are antecedent to the cultural conditions they describe. I pair three mid-Victorian fictional texts *Jane Eyre*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *The Mill on the Floss* with three later non-fictional autobiographies written by women near the end of the Victorian Era: Annie Besant (1847- 1933), Mary Anne Hearn (1834-1909) and Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904). These women came to spiritual maturity during the same time period in which the fictional heroines Jane Eyre, Aurora Leigh and Maggie Tulliver became prominent in the popular imagination and informed the cultural dialogue about women's roles and spirituality. With the advantage of hindsight, Besant, Hearn and Cobbe are able to offer perspective on cultural and religious trends that these novelists predicted, and they are also able to show how the models presented in novels did or did not correspond with the realities of women's spiritual lives in Victorian England. To draw attention to ways that both the fictional and non-fictional autobiographies use the spiritual autobiography to convert readers to new beliefs about how and what women believe, I focus on the persuasive elements of the conversion narrative and read these texts through the lens of classical rhetorical appeals. By identifying the conversion experience as the common denominator in these diverse texts, I bring these examples of fictional and non-fictional autobiographies onto a level playing and demonstrate both the flexibility of the conversion narrative and the artistry of the non-fictional autobiographers in revising it. I find that the fictional autobiographers employ models of private introspection and substitute scenes of domestic reconciliation for traditional reconciliation with God; however, the three real-life autobiographers must reconcile their personal spiritual transformations with their public personae. Hence they replace the novels' domestic allegories of reconciliation with accounts appropriate to their own new spiritual identities, ranging from evangelical Christian, to Theist, to Theosophist.

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## Introduction

Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933), best known for breaking from the Anglican Church, promoting birth control, and leading the Theosophical Society, introduces the story of her unconventional life with a highly conventional apology:

At best, [telling the story of a life] has a savour of vanity, and the only excuse for the proceeding is that the life, being an average one, reflects many others, and in troublous times like ours, may give the experience of many rather than of one [...] It may well be that the story of one may help all, and that the tale of one who went out alone into the darkness and on the other side found light, that struggled through the Storm and on the other side found Peace, may bring some ray of light and of peace into the darkness and storm of other lives. (i)

Like many autobiographers before her, Besant weighs the costs and benefits of making one's private life public and comes to the altruistic conclusion that the benefit to others outweighs the “cost of some unpleasantness” to herself. But despite her claims, Besant's life was hardly an average one, and her autobiography is often much less invested in divulging the details of her own *de*-conversions than it is in inspiring a special kind of conversion in the reader.

Of course this effect is by no means Besant's innovation. Historically the term “conversion narrative” carries dual meaning: the text recounts the conversion experience of the autobiographer and also leads readers toward and through their own conversion experience. Nor is this effect limited to the non-fictional autobiography. The novel, especially the *Bildungsroman*, offers patterns for individual growth and models for introspection. Novelists have the luxury of inventing experiences for their characters and establishing new patterns of interpretation for their narrators, a luxury allowing

them to imagine and present possibilities for human experience only dreamed of in real life. As a result, when readers follow the lead of the fictional converts and find themselves drawn toward and through a conversion experience based on that reading, they bring to life and authenticate a fictional idea.

Such reading experiences support Nancy Armstrong's claim that the novel creates the modern individual, and not, as Ian Watt asserts, vice versa. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction* Armstrong argues, among other things, that 1) the “domestic novel – was indeed antecedent to – the way of life it represented” and 2) the novel became the means by which models for female behavior were both deployed and challenged. Thus, the modern individual, she says, was “first and foremost, a woman.” The novel became the arena in which the restrictions on female writing were both created and modified. Armstrong does not view these restrictions as wholly a means of subordinating women, but as a means of creating new categories of knowledge, some of which came to be ruled by women. Armstrong writes, “to her went authority over the household, leisure time, courtship procedures and kinsman relations, and under her jurisdiction the most basic qualities of human identity were supposed to develop” (3)

For everything that Armstrong associates with the novel – the formation of this modern female individual and new codes of female conduct and middle-class morality – she offers little explicit discussion of spiritual formation. This may be less an omission on her part than a reflection of the shift in emphasis that accompanied the creation of the modern individual, bound up as it was in the redistribution of distinct social differences. In this shift, religious identity becomes subordinate to social identity, and,

as Armstrong argues, with the rise of the novel all social differences become subordinate to gender.

In the context of the Victorian spiritual crisis, however, the category of spirituality is not so easily dismissed. Linda Peterson addresses this concern in *The Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography* when she explores different kinds of nineteenth-century women's life writing. She observes that women contributed much less often to the traditional English spiritual autobiography during the Victorian period, principally because the genre was traditionally hermeneutic, and within the doctrine of separate spheres the act of interpretation was reserved for the intellectual male, while the more emotional aspects of spirituality were reserved for the female. But just as Armstrong celebrated new female agency within new female categories of knowledge, Peterson observes that women did participate in, and even invented a variety of other autobiographical traditions, such as the domestic romance, the missionary memoir, the professional artist's life, and the *chroniques scandaleuse*. As she explores the ways women used these forms, either instead of or in combination with spiritual autobiography, Peterson includes both fictional and non-fictional examples.

Given Armstrong's implication that spiritual identity was subordinated to other categories of identity, and given Peterson's claims that women did not want for a variety of more flexible autobiographical genres, it might seem that spiritual autobiographies by women should remain an unlamented casualty of the rise of the modern individual. But while they were creating other forms of identity and other forms of autobiographical writing, nineteenth-century women did not completely abandon spiritual

autobiography. Elements of the evangelical conversion narrative, including Biblical typology, continue to shape both their fictional and non-fictional autobiographies.

Hence, this project refocuses on spirituality in general and the evangelical conversion narrative in particular, but now within the context of the novel as an agent of cultural change. I do not simply point out the elements of the evangelical conversion narratives in women's narratives. Instead I ask whether nineteenth-century novels created new models for women's spiritual formation, and how these models shaped the spiritual lives of later Victorians. I conclude that among the varied traditions influencing Victorian women's autobiography, a modified but still identifiable version of the evangelical conversion narrative remains active in nineteenth-century women's fiction. I also find late-Victorian autobiographers following suit, also doing hermeneutic work and also using the evangelical conversion narrative to trace their journeys to both Christian and non-Christian, but nevertheless spiritual, ends.

To reach these conclusions, I pair three novels, *Jane Eyre*, *Aurora Leigh*,<sup>1</sup> and *The Mill on the Floss*, with later, non-fictional autobiographies in order to examine the ways that the patterns at work in the fictional examples play out in non-fictional examples. To represent the non-fictional autobiography, I choose three authors who record their life stories near the end of the Victorian era: Annie Besant (1847- 1933), Mary Anne Hearn (1834-1909) and Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904). Besant, Hearn and Cobbe all lived during the second half of the nineteenth century and wrote their

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1 As Marjorie Stone has argued, it is the fusion of poetic and novelistic conventions that gives *Aurora Leigh* power to subvert gender expectations (115-127). Without disregarding Barrett Browning's own designation of *Aurora Leigh* as both novel and poem, I refer to *Aurora Leigh* as a novel and group it with other fictional autobiographies to highlight ways Aurora's narrative functions as *Bildungsroman* and creates a new role model for Victorian readers.

autobiographies at the end of the Victorian period, in 1893, 1906 and 1894, respectively. These women came to spiritual maturity during the same time period in which the fictional heroines Jane Eyre, Aurora Leigh and Maggie Tulliver became prominent in the popular imagination and informed the cultural dialogue about women's roles and spirituality. With the advantage of hindsight, Besant, Hearn and Cobbe are able to offer perspective on cultural and religious trends that these novelists predicted, and they are also able to show how the models presented in novels did or did not correspond with the realities of women's spiritual lives in Victorian England. To draw attention to ways that both the fictional and non-fictional autobiographies use the genre to convert readers to new beliefs about how and what women believe, I focus on the inherently persuasive elements of the conversion narrative and read them through the lens of classical rhetorical appeals.

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The spiritual autobiography, whether in fictional or non-fictional form has always carried with it the potential for enacting cultural change through individual transformation. The genre is, by design, self-perpetuating. The conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus provides a template: an epiphanic moment of enlightenment (in which he is blinded by a bright light and hears the voice of Christ) causes a change in direction (both literal and spiritual) followed by a lifelong struggle to remain true to that calling. The pattern repeats throughout the New Testament and beyond, with the testimony of one believer inspiring the testimony of another. Augustine's conversion begins when a voice instructs him to "take up and read," a call he heeds by reading a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans and subsequently giving up his worldly

lifestyle. During the Reformation, in his study of both Augustine and Paul, Martin Luther resurrects this model of the intensely personal conversion experience to help individualize and democratize spirituality. Paradoxically, it is exactly this trend toward individualization that led many Puritan communities to make the public testimony of conversion a requirement for church membership. By the time Bunyan allegorizes the conversion experience in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Puritans were familiar with what Edmund Morgan identifies as a prescriptive morphology of conversion, which included the following: a general understanding of good and evil, awareness of one's own sin, conviction (or humiliation, recognition of the need of salvation), desire to believe, fight against doubt and despair, feeling of assurance, grief for sin, and finally a sense of grace and new obedience (Morgan 68-70).

As this morphology of conversion becomes increasingly familiar, in both written and oral forms, it becomes easy for participants to lose sight of the radical nature of the genre's roots: Paul's conversion constitutes rebellion against his own Jewish heritage and a crime against the Roman state, and he asks his readers to do likewise, risking their livelihood and very lives for the sake of freedom in Christ. Augustine's journey is riddled with public and private controversy, for his conversion leads him to challenge the Donatists, leave his post at the university, begin a monastic community and leave his concubine in order to bring his professional and familial practices into line with his new beliefs. When Bunyan charts his own turn from sinfulness to salvation, his non-conformism offends the Anglican establishment and requires that he, like Paul, write much of his testimony from prison. By the nineteenth century, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* remained a bestseller, but its radical message had become so watered down

that readers tended to read it secularly, more as a guide to moral uprightness and less as a guide to Christian radicalism.

Bunyan provides a good example of how spiritual autobiography begets spiritual autobiography and often crosses generic boundaries to do so. He first wrote *Grace Abounding*, a non-fictional version of his experience, and then re-wrote it as an allegory in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which in turn inspired an untold number of readers not only to consider “God's work” upon them, but to follow Bunyan's example and write it down. Such repetition creates difference, so that each new autobiography, fictional or otherwise, acknowledges the conventions of the genre but also modifies those conventions in varying degrees to accommodate individual experience. The degree of change to the genre is relative to the degree of change in individual experience—or the perception thereof. For example, early evangelical writers were likely to continue to write about their lives in conventional ways. As Bruce D. Hindmarsh explains: “They did not essentialize the self because they recognized in the last analysis that they were seeking not to author their own stories, but to discern, even if sometimes through a glass darkly, the story that God was authoring and for which their lives were the text” (346).

The emphasis on introspection, however, when combined with a less religious, more egocentric tendency marked the beginning of the modern period and coincided with what Ian Watt refers to as the “three greatest autobiographical confessions of the modern period, those of Pepys, Rousseau and Boswell” (75). The rise of autobiographies that emphasize the individual subject corresponds to the rise of the novel. While Watt claims that the rise of the novel came after the rise of the individual, and Armstrong reverses the causality, they would both agree that in the modern novel, “the plot had to

be acted out by particular people in particular circumstances rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background primarily determined by the appropriate literary convention” (Watt 15).

This rate of change to the genre was later accelerated by the Romantics, who dramatically emphasized individual experience and experimented with poetry to narrate secular transformations. M.H. Abrams notes that while the conventional evangelical conversion experience emphasized a renewed relationship between man and God (illuminating what “God hath done for their souls”), the Romantic conversion experience shifts emphasis to the renewal of other fractured relationships: man and community, man and nature, and most significantly, man and himself. Thus the secular version of the conversion narrative is born: in the Romantic *Bildungsroman*, “the painful process of Christian conversion and redemption becomes the painful process of self-formation, crisis and self-recognition which culminates in a stage of self-coherence, self-awareness, and assured power that is its own reward” (Abrams 96).

Despite the shift away from a theological center and toward humanism and naturalism, the evangelical function of spiritual autobiography continued to operate for the Romantics. Abrams asks, “to what extent did Wordsworth succeed as an evangelist of nature and mind?” and cites the example of John Stuart Mill, whose “austerely secular account of his intellectual development” is interrupted by a crisis of faith assuaged only when he discovers the same crisis pattern at play in Wordsworth's poetry (135). Mill reads the “Intimations Ode” autobiographically and finds,

[Wordsworth] too had similar experience to mine; that he also had felt the first freshness of youthful enjoyment of life was not lasting; but that he had sought for

compensation, and found it, in the way in which he was now teaching me to find it. (122)

Mill continues, “I long continued to value Wordsworth less according to his intrinsic merits, than by the measure of what he had done for me” (122). Mill's reading of Wordsworth's poetry illustrates a shift in belief systems and “sacred” texts, replacing scripture with Romantic poetry. Yet at the core, the crisis pattern remains intact, as well as the evangelical function of the spiritual autobiography: one writer's expression of private experience leads another to identify and understand his own private experience, which he in turn records, and so on.

Mill's utilitarian education proves insufficient to sustain him spiritually, and his quest for something unseen beyond material reality becomes characteristic of the Victorian quest, though for Victorians, redemption was less often found in Romanticism. In *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction*, Qualls explains that if the Puritan quest was a quest toward God, and the romantic revision was a quest toward self, then neither was satisfactory for the Victorians, who remained uncomfortable with Christian paradigms and Romantic solipsism. As a result they tended to hold onto the Religious language and counteract Romantic solipsism with an emphasis on social community. Thus Carlyle announces, through the fictional *Sartor Resartus*, a new Victorian sensibility by embedding revisions of both religious and romantic autobiography in layers of meta-narrative, which gesture toward a uniquely Victorian celebration of duty.

All six of the narrators in the texts treated here function in some ways like the English editor of *Sartor Resartus*. They attempt to present the unorganized

autobiographical material of their lives into a narrative pattern that is meaningful to their readers, even when that material remains as incompatible with reader expectations as Teufelsdröckh's history was with the Bunyanesque model. As the history of the spiritual autobiography in England demonstrates, it is exactly that discord that repeatedly transforms both the genre and its readers. Thus the history of the conversion narrative also testifies to its great versatility. Cultural forces may appropriate the form to encourage conformity, but nevertheless it will always maintain the power to inspire dramatic cultural change, even change opposed to that intended by its originators.

For female authors, this duality of the conversion narrative becomes a powerful tool for converting readers to new beliefs about how women experience belief. They learned to invoke it to challenge the Victorian ideology of separate spheres. This construct restricted a woman to the private sphere (the home) while her husband represented their household in the public sphere (the market). The hearth was a site of spiritual and emotional renewal; therefore any disruption to the woman's faith jeopardized the spiritual integrity of the home, which was necessary to mitigate the ill effects of marketplace corruption on her husband. His was the realm of intellect, hers the realm of emotion<sup>2</sup>. In an effort to draw attention to how this system created burdens for women and made them dependent upon men, women novelists complicated the shift from romantic to Victorian spiritual autobiographies by offering a female perspective.

Qualls observes how in *Jane Eyre* and in her other novels, Charlotte Brontë broadened Carlyle's scope to include the question of women's work: she "explores the

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<sup>2</sup> In *Reclaiming the Myths of Power: Victorian Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis*, Ruth Jenkins examines ways the combination of Protestantism and Capitalism in the nineteenth century contributed to the evolution of the home into "a recognized symbol of purity, thus fixing the character of women and the domestic sphere as separate and undefiled by the world" (18)

dangers of an oversimplified assertion of the spiritual, self-defining nature of work when that work does not mean the same thing for women as it does for men” (Qualls 44). Likewise *Aurora Leigh* broadens the scope of the *Bildungsroman* by featuring a female artist and setting her spiritual growth against the backdrop of the overpopulated Victorian city instead of the vast, unpeopled and uncluttered landscapes favored by the Romantics. And in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot offers a commentary—through Maggie's loss of faith and Romanticism and turn to self-renunciation—on the difficulties of translating this transformation into the context of provincial life. By Armstrong's logic, by using the novel these authors need not represent realities of women's experience, but can imagine new possibilities for women's experience.

Even though strict generic classification would exclude *The Mill on the Floss*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Jane Eyre* from the category of autobiography simply because they are fiction,<sup>3</sup> the underlying structure of the evangelical conversion narrative increases their persuasive force. Critics such as Gilbert and Gubar have duly noted, for example, how *Jane Eyre* invokes the most conventional elements of the evangelical conversion narrative by mimicking and revising important milestones such as the “Slough of Despond” and the “Celestial City” from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (336, 342). Jane sets out from the aptly named “Gateshead,” suffers the depths of hunger and humility at “Lowood,” finds both thorns and flowers (trials and temptations) at “Thornfield,” discovers reason and humanitarianism at the “end” of her horrific journey across the moor at Marsh End and so on. These instances of heavy-handed symbolism only draw

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3 For example, Phillipe Lejeune defines autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is on the individual life, in particular the story of his own personality” (4).

attention to how unconventional Jane's choices actually are: when St. John gives her the opportunity to redeem herself in Victorian terms and embody a self-sacrificing version of female Christianity, she stoutly refuses. What might have been a satisfactory conclusion according to the unwritten rules of Victorian ideology is not a satisfactory option for Jane. Instead, she seeks a promised land that is conventional in form only: it may resemble reconciliation in paradise, but edenic Ferndean thoroughly upsets patriarchal structures. Jane submits to no higher power (neither Rochester nor God) and maintains control of her own destiny.

For writers like Charlotte Brontë, the fictional autobiography seemed to be an attractive alternative to working out spiritual crises in non-fictional autobiographies. For this reason, many critics turn to fiction instead of non-fiction to study the private lives of women.<sup>4</sup> Sally Mitchell observes that there were many unwritten rules for women's autobiography during this period that made sharp distinctions between public and private experience, so that “the convincing portrayal of girls' interior experience, although long familiar in novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* required a fictional persona when the century drew to a close” (153). Observing that many studies of the Victorian spiritual crisis exclude women's crises because they do not fit neatly into traditional definitions of faith and doubt, Ruth Jenkins turns to novels to study the spiritual crises of Gaskell, Brontë and Eliot. She finds that more flexible boundaries of fiction allow women writers to interpret the patterns of their own crises and subvert

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4 In “Women as Writers and Readers of (Auto)biography,” Joanne Shattock argues for the validity of this practice as a means of understanding how Victorian women writers learned about one another. They were in the habit of reading fictional autobiographies, autobiographies and biographies together as a means of understanding the author, partly because they were “untroubled by anxieties about the referentiality of language or the authenticity of the self” (141).

patriarchal scripts in a variety of ways. Thus, when Gilbert and Gubar remark that Jane's story “provid[es] a pattern for countless others” – they presumably refer to countless other *fictional* examples that feature “a story of enclosure and escape, a distinctively female *Bildungsroman*” (338-339) (my emphasis).

For the purposes of this project, however, I am less interested in lamenting the disparity between autobiographies in fiction and non-fiction, and more interested in exploring how this new tradition of a “distinctively female *Bildungsroman*” created new models for female spiritual formation, and how those new models influenced non-fictional examples of women's spiritual autobiography. The plot parallels between *Jane Eyre* and other examples of the female *Bildungsroman* in fiction have been well documented, but how would Jane's revisions to the conventional conversion narrative begin to resonate in non-fictional examples by the end of the century? How would other prominent fictional autobiographers, such as *Aurora Leigh* serve as role models outside of the fictions they were born into? And how might the narrative of an ill-fated heroine, like Maggie Tulliver, who does not tell her own story, awaken echoes in later autobiography? As the answers to these questions unfold, it would be remiss to not also ask whether later autobiographies offer revisions, clarifications, or challenges to these fictional narratives.

As we shall see, all the tropes at work in the novels do indeed reappear in their non-fictional counterparts. First, each narrative reflects the larger shift from religious to romantic to Victorian concerns. Even Mary Anne Hearn, who maintains her original evangelical Christian perspective throughout her life, learns to draw inspiration from secular reading and marks her reading of *Jane Eyre* as a turning point in her early

experience as a reader and writer. Additionally, Hearn's autobiography reminds us that in many cases, a Victorian commitment to duty and good works differed in name only from an evangelical commitment to these same goals. Both Besant and Cobbe also offer lengthy descriptions of their good works and celebrate a commitment to duty.

Second, like the novels' protagonists, these autobiographers broaden their roles beyond those included within women's separate-sphere ideology. Besant, for example, not only broke from Christianity but also divorced her husband. Hearn turned down a marriage proposal, remained single and wrote her way to financial independence. Cobbe's father dismissed her from his home for a year when she announced her commitment to Theism, and she later kept house with another woman, her lifelong companion Mary Lloyd. Instead of dedicating their lives wholly to the domestic order, each of these women worked tirelessly for their respective causes, often in the public sphere. Besant spoke on behalf of freedom of thought, secularism and women's rights; Mary Anne Hearn promoted co-operation among non-conformist Christian groups; Cobbe worked for women's suffrage and the abolition of vivisection. All three were prolific writers and sought-after public speakers with large followings.

Third, because all three begin their spiritual journeys as Christians, and because they remain evangelists (though not necessarily Christian evangelists) it should be no surprise that their narratives make allusions to the conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative even though their lives offer unconventional testimonies to the often-unorthodox causes they represent. Besant, for example, when recalling her period of both intellectual and emotional doubts, must create a narrative pattern that will create empathy for the radical nature of her de-conversion and make a case for her as

the guardian of her children. Therefore she layers the familiar narrative patterns of domesticity and conversion with the unfamiliar elements of her unique de-conversion experiences.

Because Besant, Hearn and Cobbe wrote non-fictional versions of their spiritual autobiographies instead of novels, their narratives are most often read as supporting documents for canonized novels, invaluable for understanding the real-life challenges of nineteenth-century women. And indeed, Besant, for example, offers insight into the cult of mysticism that influenced so many nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century artists and writers; Hearn offers a working class perspective on village life, non-conformism and evangelical journalism; and Cobbe details the challenges of her political campaigns, including her successes and disappointments as a tireless advocate for the rights of the poor and disenfranchised. Though their life experiences might have been the stuff of novels, these women were not novelists. But the fact that they wrote non-fiction and were not novelists should not preclude attempts to bring their autobiographies onto a level playing field with the fictional examples that might have predicted the real life experiences described within them.

One characteristic of this playing field is that these disparate narratives all draw on a critical though under-appreciated convention of the conversion narrative, the practice of offering a testimony in order to enlighten and persuade. Therefore I read all six texts as persuasive narratives, written to witness to alternative belief systems or to create empathy with the autobiographical subject who has chosen to do so. And I find that much of what makes these autobiographies compelling occurs at that rhetorical level, in the creative and artful construction of relationships between reader, narrator

and subject. Thus the rhetorical triangle – and the special ways it works in autobiography – can serve as an organizing principle for these three chapters.

I juxtapose *Jane Eyre* with *An Autobiography* by Annie Wood Besant to explore the careful construction of the ideal reader (pathos), because both *Jane Eyre* and Annie Besant shape the ways their reader experiences their narratives: they both find innovative ways to create a sense of intimacy with this reader without sacrificing privacy. I pair Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* with Mary Anne Hearn's *A Working Woman's Life* to explore the careful construction of an ideal narrator (ethos), because both *Aurora Leigh* and Mary Anne Hearn are deeply invested in presenting themselves as new versions of a literary heroine. *Aurora* provides a female counterpart to the more familiar male literary hero and Mary Anne Hearn provides a working-class heroine to contrast with *Aurora*'s privileged one. Finally I pair Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* with *The Life of Frances Power Cobbe* to explore each narrator's rigorous scrutiny of her own belief system (logos), because Frances Power Cobbe tries to examine the beliefs of her younger self with the same rigorous objectivity used by the narrator of *Mill* to critique the beliefs of Maggie Tulliver.

### *Pathos*

The first chapter exposes a remarkable similarity in plot structures of *Jane Eyre* and Besant's autobiography, as well in the way the two narrators construct the narrator-reader relationship. Besant uses several prominent, late-Romantic narratives of the sort that *Jane Eyre* popularized, including the orphan myth and the domestic romance. Both narrators find ways to structure their spiritual journey so that it simultaneously alludes

to and revises conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative. For example, when Jane is lost and lonely on the moor, she is clearly going through her own “Valley of the Shadow of Death,” but her survival testifies to her ability to control her own destiny rather than to a renewed faith in her creator as the author and protector of her faith. Likewise, Besant experiences a prolonged period of despair, yet instead of recovering her faith, she is empowered by rejecting it and openly professes socialism and atheism. When she does eventually experience a conversion to a belief in a higher power, she does not return to Christianity but turns instead to the theosophical teachings of the controversial H.B. Blavatsky.

These revisions are all the more risky because they are made by female autobiographers: as they challenge conventional Christianity, they also challenge the stereotypes of gender and domestic order. Both make claims for the independence of women by turning upside down the conventions of the hearth – Jane by rejecting St. John Rivers' marriage proposal and marrying Rochester on her own terms, and Besant by divorcing her Anglican vicar husband and finding a form of domestic tranquility in her professional partnership with Charles Bradlaugh. Though domestic narrative remains prominent in both accounts, the contrast between the conventions of domestic romance and the alternative scenarios presented in these accounts serve as an indictment against a society that would declare Jane-the-governess unworthy of social and economic mobility and Besant-the-atheist an unfit mother.

The parallels between these two narratives seem all the more remarkable when we remember that unlike the fictional Jane Eyre, Annie Besant had her own personal, real-life reputation at stake as she wrote her autobiography without the protective mask

of fiction or the male pseudonym that Charlotte Brontë enjoyed. Besant does however employ a protective strategy that Jane Eyre the autobiographer has perfected, carefully constructing the narrator-reader relationship and carefully plotting the reader's conversion. She must craft the narrator-reader relationship and the reader's conversion at the level of narration rather than the level of plot. At the level of plot we find the story of Jane's experiences; at the level of narration we find the story of when and what Jane chooses to share with her reader. This distinction I borrow from Lisa Sternlieb's perceptive reading of *Jane Eyre*. Sternlieb points out many subtle ways that Jane intentionally creates a false sense of intimacy with the reader in order to seduce this reader in the same way that Rochester has seduced her. I extend the parallels between the seduction of the reader and the conversion of the reader, arguing that Jane converts the reader to a more open and sympathetic view of women by creating a false sense of intimacy – while she mimics Rochester's seduction techniques, she also uses the conventions of the conversion narrative to create a space within her own narration for the reader's conversion to take place.

By extension, I argue that this seduction, or conversion, of the reader also occurs at the level of narration in Annie Besant's *Autobiography*. While Jane constructs her reader much as Rochester tried to construct Jane, we find the template for the relationship between Besant and her reader in one arresting scene in which she delivers a sermon to an empty chapel. As she hears her own voice, she also imagines that she sees her audience: she thus creates this audience in the very attempt to convert them. This scene also exemplifies the challenge of creating intimacy and privacy simultaneously. On one hand, she invites the reader into a scene that was once private,

but on the other hand, she illustrates how the conversion experience occurs only in the context of her own willingness to tell her story.

### *Ethos*

A second necessity for autobiography is the negotiation among various versions of the self, a negotiation which becomes particularly difficult for members of the working classes, who, as Regenia Gagnier observes, “were competing with more imaginative and compelling pictures of themselves in fiction” (145). To explore the way autobiographers learned to negotiate the construction of the self through the conversion narrative, I pair Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* with *A Working Woman's Life by Marianne Farningham*.

“Marianne Farningham” was the pen name of Mary Anne Hearn, a Christian journalist who remained loyal to her evangelical working-class roots and to her working-class readership throughout her career. Hearn was prolific, famous in her own right among the numerous readers of the *The Christian World* and the *Sunday School Times*, the latter priced at less than a penny to make it affordable to the working classes. Many of her loyal followers were illiterate, depending on friends and family members to read her columns and poetry aloud. Both men and women would gather in great numbers to hear her speak publicly, and a glowing obituary expresses doubt that “any woman journalist of the last half-century gave so much pleasure and gentle inspiration to her readers” (“The Death of Marianne Farningham” 23).

Yet despite her success as a working class heroine of the press, Hearn often remarks upon the disparity between her own career and that of other writers, between

what she actually accomplished and what she might have accomplished if her family had been able to afford more consistent formal education. Additionally, there is a sense even in her early childhood that her love of reading and writing, especially as a female, conflicted with the working-class values of her community. But Hearn was encouraged to overcome this prejudice against popular literature under the guidance of her friend and mentor, the Reverend John Whittemore. Whittemore served Eynsford's small village church on weekends and edited *The Christian World* while in London during the week. He encouraged Hearn to read novels and Shakespeare's plays in order to develop an appreciation for good writing, and to improve her own. While this new perspective helped to sanctify the life of reading and writing for Hearn, it also set up the stark contrast between the kind of literature she was able to write and the kind of literature she longed to write. She remembers reading *Jane Eyre* and laments that her own attempt at novel-writing was a poor one. Though her essays and poetry found a broad audience, they were often trite, sentimental and hastily written under the demands of a weekly print deadline.

The tension between the reality of her working-class journalistic career and the fantasy of the successful artist's life is a quiet theme throughout Hearn's autobiography, setting her narrative in contrast with one of the best-known icons of nineteenth-century literary heroism: Aurora Leigh. The two narrators serve as foils to and temptations for each other. Aurora must resist the temptation to give up her art and write solely “for the booksellers”; she mentions the class of writers who make a career of such writing only to set them up as a foil for her own later successes. Likewise Hearn must resist the temptation to use her writing as a means of escape from her working-class origins.

Whether it is ultimately a lack of talent or a strong sense of loyalty to her class, Hearn makes the most of her working class station, and thus turns failure into a means of success. Thus I read her autobiography as a working-class revision of *Aurora Leigh*.

But I also read Hearn's autobiography as a revision of the autobiography within Aurora's autobiography, the narrative of impoverished Marian Erle. Aurora makes it clear that she tells a variation of Marian's story, that it is her job as artist to translate Marian's narrative into the language of epic poetry. Aurora freely admits that when she tells Marian's story, she tells it with her own embellishments, and that she has inferred meaning from Marian's circumstances that Marian does not express herself. This editing of the working class autobiography presents a challenge to the working-class writer who would prefer to tell her story on her own terms. Mary Ann Hearn meets this challenge in her own autobiography by providing the first-hand narrative of working class experience that Aurora (and by extension Elizabeth Barrett Browning) could not and would not provide.

### *Logos*

Just as Mary Ann Hearn worked to unmask romanticized versions of the working class, the narrators of *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Life of Frances Power Cobbe* are deeply invested in the patterns of belief that shape the ways their subjects, Maggie Tulliver and the young Frances Power Cobbe, lose and regain faith in evangelicalism and romanticism.

Both narrators exploit and critique the Victorian trope of fetishism to unmask false beliefs and prompt readers to rigorously scrutinize their own belief systems. The

narrators model the stance of the fetish critic and identify the younger subjects as fetishists: the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* critiques Maggie's provincial fetishism and Frances Power Cobbe (as narrator) critiques the evangelical beliefs held by her younger self. This structure appears early in parallel accounts of childhood fetishism: Maggie is seen taking out her anger on an old doll, and Cobbe recalls her own belief in a mythical being known as "Peter." These incidents become analogies for the ways that other narratives, such as those associated with evangelical Christianity and provincial materialism, function as fetishes.

In *Victorian Fetishism*, Peter Logan explains that by characterizing the Tullivers and Dodsons as fetishists, Eliot can show that fetishism was not relegated to colonized Africa but was in fact an organizing principle of provincial life in England (6). Cobbe boldly takes the project one step further by identifying the patterns of fetishism at work in her own spiritual history. Like Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, she is unable to escape the powerful hold of primitive beliefs. Though she rejects her evangelical Christianity as fetishistic, she eventually re-constructs her most treasured beliefs through a process that almost perfectly illustrates Feuerbach's concept of fetishism. What is remarkable in Cobbe's narrative is that she seems to be aware of, yet not immobilized by, the fact that one cannot fully escape the structure of fetishism. Instead of becoming demoralized by this discovery, Cobbe is empowered by her ability to identify and choose which fetishistic beliefs she will adhere to.

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As these summaries suggest, this project will present much evidence to support Armstrong's claim that the novels are antecedent to the worlds they describe, for there

are many similarities between the mid-century novels and these non-fictional autobiographies appearing at the close of the century. The novels have the power to deploy new models for female spiritual formation partly because the novel as a genre was well established as a vehicle for cultural change, but also, I argue, because they are persuasive documents, exploiting the evangelical aspect of the conversion narrative and classical rhetorical appeals. These novelists' effectiveness as evangelists reshaping how and what women believe will be put to the test when we juxtapose these fictional narratives with the non-fictional real-life narratives of later Victorian women.

These juxtapositions establish that the autobiographies treated here challenge these novels, both in their conclusions and in their claims to effect cultural change. For example, all three novels reveal a desire for something beyond the Victorian belief in social community, something beyond self-renunciation and beyond a traditional faith in God. But if the novelists propose alternatives to these patterns, these alternatives are either accompanied by or embodied in domestic reunions. Jane is reconciled with Rochester, Aurora with Romney, and Maggie (briefly) with Tom. All three of the non-fictional autobiographies treated here challenge this domestic turn – if only because their real-life experiences cannot conform to it. More importantly, the autobiographers also make their own final turn (or re-turn) to a belief in some higher power, Christian or otherwise. Mary Anne Hearn remains Christian, Besant rejects materialism in her conversion to Theosophy, and Cobbe recovers from her difficult and un-consoling agnosticism by returning to her most cherished beliefs, but in a modified, Theist version. There is no consistency in how this turn occurs: Hearn quietly discovers some compatibility between her career as a writer and her evangelical Christianity, Besant

rather suddenly abandons the secularism she had fought so hard for, and Cobbe methodically reviews her own former belief systems and compares them with other existing systems until she identifies a compromise.

If the novels offer new patterns for interpreting experience, and thus new modes of subjectivity, the autobiographers find ways both to authenticate those patterns and challenge them. All of these autobiographers acknowledge the need to find patterns for their experiences, and like Carlyle's editor, attempt to present their narratives in a familiar, conventional form that resonates with their readers. But ultimately, they each choose a system of belief that transcends gender boundaries and the limits of fiction. By exploiting the conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative and the classical rhetorical appeals, these autobiographers testify to the validity of their own final conversions, but also to their right, as women, to identify and interpret their own spiritual experiences.

## Chapter One: Jane Eyre and Annie Besant

*Jane Eyre* functions as spiritual autobiography in the most practical sense: by providing an intimate portrait of one individual's private experience, it compels readers to reflect upon their own development. This is part of what makes Charlotte Brontë's fiction so appealing, according to Ian Campbell, who says that all the Brontës' novels have the ability to change the readers' perception of themselves:

What [The Brontës] achieved [...] is the ability to enable readers to see for the first time, or more clearly than before, some facet of experience or behavior, some moral code, some interpersonal relation which illuminates the reader's society, their age – most strikingly, themselves [...] If we see ourselves in these characters [...] then the act of reading the books makes us see the totality of which we are a part in new ways. (2,4)

Though he does not use the term “spiritual autobiography,” the phenomenon Campbell describes, this special relationship between reader and text, is strikingly similar to the intended effect of the conventional conversion narrative: to tell the story of an individual life for the edification of its reader. *Jane Eyre* is evangelical in the sense that it is pervasively influential in literature and culture, and Campbell attributes its popularity directly to Charlotte Brontë's “ability to make the inner life of one individual accessible to another.” Thus “The conviction that Jane has an independent existence, a psychological development which has brought her to this crisis, forces the reader to identify with Jane, and *through* Jane to the areas of private experience which the reader feels and Jane would have felt” (Campbell 5).

While an untold number of readers must share Campbell's feeling, Lisa Sternlieb argues that a sense of being privy to the “areas of private experience” is, on Jane's part, an artistic ruse. According to Sternlieb, Jane actually conceals information from her reader in exactly the same way that she has seen Rochester conceal information from her, and Rochester conceals everything except details about himself that he can use to seduce her. In this chapter I build on Sternlieb's reading of Jane as seductress, but read it through the lens of the evangelical conversion narrative and thus re-define the reader's seduction as the reader's conversion. I also test the efficacy of this conversion by tracing how this pattern works in non-fiction, specifically in the *Autobiography* of Annie Wood Besant.

Linda Peterson identifies the spiritual autobiography as one of several different autobiographical traditions at work in *Jane Eyre*. She shows how *Jane Eyre* borrows heavily from the domestic memoir, domestic romance, the Gothic, and the missionary narrative, and explains how Brontë combines elements of these disparate genres and sets them against each other in the text, in order to make “claims about women’s rights and responsibilities” (81). For example, Peterson sees a “contest” between “Jane’s domesticized version of spiritual autobiography and St. John’s alternative spiritual form – the female missionary narrative” (103). Peterson sees Brontë making revisions to the tradition by combining elements of different genres, in that she “makes spiritual satisfaction dependent upon the integration of the romantic desires traditionally excluded from (or repressed by) spiritual autobiography” (92). Peterson explains:

If *Jane Eyre* contributes to a new tradition of spiritual autobiography for Victorian women, it does so by domesticating an older, spiritual form – by transferring its concerns from the realms of the religious and the sublime to the

more generally moral, by refocusing its concerns but also taming its ambition, and by substituting a woman's domestic and romantic life for the Celestial City as the site of aspiration. (108)

With this substitution, Peterson's analysis implies the reversal of a prototype established early on by Bunyan. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian feels the tension between the spiritual family and his earthly family. He must tear himself away from his home and all the temptations it represents. As he runs away, he puts "his fingers in his ears [...] crying 'Life, life, eternal life'" (Bunyan 13). This familiar tension between the earthly family and spiritual family takes on a variety of new implications in the context of a Victorian woman's experience because separate spheres ideology locates female spirituality at the proverbial hearth and sentimentalizes the mother-child relationship. This effectively reverses Bunyan's pattern, suggesting that the spiritual quest leads into the domestic realm rather than away from it. Jane accepts this reversal (much to the chagrin of many feminist critics); however, with characteristic persistence, she makes this revision entirely on her own terms.

In fact, Lisa Sternlieb argues that the domestic romance plot of *Jane Eyre* is thoroughly canceled out by the narration of that plot, that Jane is like many nineteenth and twentieth-century female narrators who "achieve power not through what they do, but how they tell" (4). Sternlieb explains how the plot of the *novel* suggests that Jane and Rochester have resolved all conflict and will live happily ever after but attending to the plot of *narration* reveals a very different story. The plot of the narration is dependent upon a series of confidence games, beginning with Rochester seducing Jane, making her his confidante, playing the role of confessor, but never telling her the whole truth. Even after Jane learns of his deceptions, she continues to play the role of

confidante, but meanwhile takes vengeance by revealing his lies in a secret manuscript addressed to her “dear reader.” She tells her story without her husband’s knowledge, stealing time to write while posing as his amanuensis, taking advantage of his poor eyesight to tell what she pleases -- which happens to include a less than flattering portrayal of his character; she “expos[es] his cruelty to Bertha, to Adele, and especially herself” (Sternlieb 18). Thus the narrative structure of *Jane Eyre* “allows the heroine to punish the husband she is ostensibly embracing.” In Sternlieb’s assessment, Jane the heroine is Christian, but Jane the narrator is “utterly unforgiving” (23).

It turns out that playing the confidante and taking revenge upon Rochester together constitutes only half the story: having learned from Rochester the art of constructing and seducing a confidante, Jane practices by constructing and seducing her own confidante -- her “gentle reader.” Sternlieb argues that Jane “engender[s] a profound but false sense of intimacy with her reader” (18), just as Rochester has engendered a profound but false sense of intimacy with Jane. However, she is a “better liar [than Rochester] because her narrative exposes all of his lies without revealing her own” (20). Sternlieb outlines the narrative strategies Jane uses to convince readers that they “know” her, as well as the numerous instances in the narrative in which Jane evades self-exposure. Ultimately, Jane presents herself as a virtuous heroine, but as a narrator is deceptive: she not only conceals her literary aspirations from her husband, while revealing them to her reader, but all the while she is “imparting what may be unreliable information” (Sternlieb 19). Thus the circumstances of narration -- the concealment of a manuscript from her husband, and the concealment of truth from her

reader -- allow Jane the narrator to create and enjoy a “level of privacy for [herself] which actual nineteenth-century women could only have dreamt of” (Sternlieb 15).

Sternlieb’s treatment of privacy as a narrative strategy helps to complicate our understanding of the novel’s function as spiritual autobiography. If the spiritual autobiography is, by definition, designed to create, or at least support, a conversion experience in the reader by revealing the details of the autobiographer’s own spiritual journey, then Jane has exploited that model when she engenders a false sense of intimacy with her reader. As she constructs an unequal narrator-reader relationship, she uses the leverage of that relationship to create a conversion experience in the reader. Again, when Ian Campbell feels “forced to identify with Jane, and through Jane to the areas of private experience,” it is because Jane has designed her narrative to create that reading experience. She “forces” Campbell to identify with her by engendering a sense of intimacy, but in the end, her narrative has revealed much more about the reader than about Jane herself. As part of her strategy for constructing privacy, she exploits the evangelistic function of the spiritual autobiography to deflect attention from herself to her reader.

This emphasis on the constructed reader of fictional spiritual autobiography changes what we might otherwise look for when we begin to trace Jane Eyre’s influence on non-fictional spiritual autobiography in the nineteenth century. For example, we *could* ask the same questions of this novel that Abrams asks of Wordsworth’s poetry: to what extent did Jane Eyre succeed as an evangelist of “women’s rights and responsibilities” (as Peterson suggests)? Did reading *Jane Eyre* help readers to discover

their own spiritual autobiography, as they too shaped their life narrative around the plot of domestic romance?

Among autobiographies by Victorian women, I have yet to find any equivalent to Mill's life-changing reading of Wordsworth; there seems to be no known example of a young nineteenth-century governess writing about finally "seeing the light" or experiencing a clear conversion to emancipated womanhood upon reading *Jane Eyre*. This void might be explained by the fact that contemporary readers were hardly encouraged to embrace *Jane Eyre* as a role model. While modern readers like Ian Campbell easily accept and celebrate the way *Jane Eyre*'s life story witnesses to female independence and human perseverance rather than conventional patriarchal Christianity, this is also the very reason that contemporary reviewers disparaged the novel and feared its influence. Elizabeth Rigby writes, "We cannot help feeling that this work must be far from beneficial to that class of young ladies [governesses] whose cause it affects to advocate" and *The Guardian*'s reviewer claims the author of the novel "cannot have considered how much mischief may be done by publishing such a creed as this, even though it be in a novel, and spoken by an untaught girl" (anonymous rev. of *Jane Eyre*) For these early reviewers, the power of fiction to imitate reality was of secondary concern to the dangerous possibility that reality might imitate fiction. General readers were equally cautious: as Amy Cruse observes, after Rigby's review appeared, "A good many years were to pass before any young lady could admit she had read and enjoyed the book" (263). For example, Elizabeth Missing Sewell records in 1857, "years ago when *Jane Eyre* came out I read it. People said it was coarse, and I felt

it was, but I also felt that the person who wrote it was not coarse-minded, that the moral of the story was intended to be good” (159-160).<sup>5</sup>

Of course *Jane Eyre* did not slip quietly out of circulation simply because of negative reviews and the fact that most women chose not to mention the novel in polite society. As Margaret Oliphant predicted in 1855, “the most alarming revolution of modern times followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre*” -- a revolution that continues to spark vibrant debate about the value of *Jane Eyre*’s influence on female readers and value as a role model. Gilbert and Gubar champion the novel because it provides “a pattern for countless others,” and because it is

a story of enclosure and escape, a distinctively female *Bildungsroman*, in which the problems encountered by the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome. (339)

Others, including Virginia Woolf, challenge the novel’s discourse of domesticity but do not deny the extent of its influence. In terms of women’s lives, and literature in general, *Jane Eyre*’s success as an evangelist of “women’s rights and responsibilities” is firmly established -- with or without archival autobiographies citing *Jane Eyre* as crucial to their authors’ spiritual development.

Perhaps the absence of autobiographies citing *Jane Eyre* in the same way that Mill cites Wordsworth can be attributed to a difference between the way nineteenth-

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5 For a late twentieth-century example of an autobiographical reading of *Jane Eyre*, see Ellen Brown’s “Between the Medusa and the Abyss: Reading *Jane Eyre*, Reading Myself.” Such readings are more common in the twentieth century, especially after the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s, when, as Patsy Stoneman observes, “an astonishing range of testimony” emerged from “women readers all over the world who remembered that as girls they had been inspired by reading *Jane Eyre*” (10). In “The Brontës in Other People’s Childhoods,” Stoneman shares the results of her search for examples of Brontë figures presented for children; with the exception of melodramatic stage versions in the 1880s, she finds little evidence for such practice until the twentieth century (3).

century men and women identified with role models in literature. Perhaps it wasn't Jane Eyre the *heroine*, defining herself in terms of domestic romance, that female autobiographers identified with. Perhaps, to borrow Sternlieb's distinction, it was Jane Eyre the *narrator*, and her ability to create a level of privacy for herself, that autobiographers found meaningful and desirable – and necessary as they wrote their own autobiographies. Instead of asking how Jane succeeded as an evangelist of women's rights and responsibilities (or any other agenda advanced by the plot of the novel rather than by the plot of narration), we should ask instead how Jane the *narrator* succeeded as an evangelist for women seeking a "level of privacy" which, Sternlieb claims, "actual nineteenth-century women could only have dreamt of" (15)? And how did she borrow the conventions of the evangelical conversion narrative to convert her readers into ideal readers of her autobiography?

To explore these questions, I will turn directly to the example of one nineteenth-century woman who was born within two weeks of the original publication of *Jane Eyre*, a woman who thus lived her entire life within the wake of that "most alarming revolution" following the introduction of Brontë's most famous character. The *Autobiography* of Annie Wood Besant is the spiritual autobiography of exactly the sort of free-thinking, independent female that Jane's original critics feared most. Where Jane Eyre was accused of being unchristian, Annie Besant was a professed Atheist. Where Jane challenged Victorian social stratification and gender boundaries, Annie assumed "unwomanly" leadership roles, using public speaking skills to fight institutionalized poverty and to champion the working class. Where Jane's sexual passion for Rochester made Victorians blush, Annie's distribution of birth control

pamphlets landed her in prison. If *Jane Eyre's* example created a slippery slope for nineteenth-century women, Annie Wood Besant slid right to the bottom of it.<sup>6</sup>

That being said, the purpose of this chapter is not to demonstrate how the young Annie Besant took inspiration directly from the pages of *Jane Eyre* as she dreamed about her future or even as she wrote about her life in retrospect. If we take her word for it, she may have never even read the novel -- from a young age her mother prohibited novel-reading in general and she herself eschewed reading "love stories" in favor of poetry, Protestant devotional writings, and tales of Christian martyrs. However, a comparison of Besant's *Autobiography* with *Jane Eyre* reveals Besant's use of several prominent, late-Romantic narratives of the sort *Jane Eyre* feminized and popularized, including the orphan myth and the domestic romance. In exploring the similarities between Besant's *Autobiography* and *Jane Eyre*, I will argue that Besant exploits these familiar narratives as well as the conventions of the spiritual autobiography in the interest of carefully constructing herself -- but more importantly, in the interest of constructing her readers and their reading experience.

Annie Besant is best known for the controversies and scandals that followed her through her serial conversions in early life. She was born into a Christian family, developed a fervent religious bent in adolescence and then, after a disappointing marriage and the near death of her infant daughter, was plunged into a period of doubt and despair and nearly committed suicide. She slowly recovered her strength and sanity

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6 For a discussion of how Besant's occult beliefs and status as Victorian female created a "double-marginalization" see Miriam Wallraven's comparison of Annie Besant's *Autobiography* with the autobiography of Spiritualist medium Emma Harding Britten. Wallraven notes that both the Theosophical Society and the Spiritualist movement depended on women leaders and advocated gender equality and women's rights, but that their spiritual autobiographies are often dismissed for being among the "lunatic fringe" of unorthodox religious rituals.

but not her Christian faith. Instead, she began a methodical analysis of Christian doctrine and rested with Theism for a short period of time. Her interest in radical activism brought her into association with the Society of Freethought, after which she became an Atheist. Over time, she gravitated toward a socialist agenda, and then somewhat abruptly converted to the Theosophical Society under the leadership of H.P. Blavatsky. After Blavatsky's death, Besant assumed leadership of and remained an active member of the Theosophical Society for the rest of her life.

In 1885 she began writing her autobiography in serial form in the secularist journal *The National Reformer*, under the title of *Autobiographical Sketches*. This series traces her life up through her socialist period. During this time she was also locked in a bitter custody battle with her husband, who argued that her Atheism and activism made her an unfit mother. Thus *Autobiographical Sketches* ends with a fervent appeal to Victorian sympathy, a defense of her character and evidence of her devotion to her children. Her second and last autobiography was published in one volume in 1893 and is written after her conversion to the Theosophical Society. She lifts large passages from the earlier autobiography but often adds Theosophical interpretations of them.

In the first autobiography, for example, she simply commemorates her first meeting with Charles Bradlaugh, leader of the Freethought movement. This meeting marked the beginning of a long friendship.

After the lecture, Mr. Bradlaugh came down the Hall with some certificates of membership of the National Secular Society in his hand, and glancing round for their claimants, caught, I suppose, some look of expectancy in my face, for he paused and handed me mine, with a questioning "Mrs. Besant?" (115)

In the second *Autobiography*, she reports the same details of the incident, but adds spiritual significance to the fact that Bradlaugh seemed to recognize her without formal introduction:

As friends, not as strangers, we met -- swift recognition, as it were, leaping from eye to eye; and I know now that the instinctive friendliness was in very truth an outgrowth of strong friendship in other lives, and that on that August day we took up again an ancient tie, we did not begin a new one. And so in lives to come we shall meet again, and help each other as we helped each other in this. (94)

In this second account, Besant explains the quickly formed bond between herself and Bradlaugh, by applying H.P. Blavatsky's teachings on reincarnation. She continues, throughout *An Autobiography*, to read her Atheist period and her work with Bradlaugh as an essential stage in her journey toward Theosophy. For instance, she takes pride in the fact that while she and Bradlaugh were working in England, Blavatsky was aware of their activism and recognized its relevance to her own teachings in the Theosophical society.

Annie Besant's belief in reincarnation, her conversion to Theosophy, and her career as a social activist and public speaker may all seem very far removed from Jane Eyre's mid-century hybrid of Christian and Romantic sensibility and her quiet work in the Victorian schoolroom. But the parallel narrative structure in these autobiographies reveals striking similarities and suggests that Besant's autobiography partly depended upon the influence of *Jane Eyre's*. Additionally, both narrators use the conventional conversion narrative as a basic structure for telling the story of their unconventional lives. They also use this narrative as a means of configuring their reader as convert -- but unlike the narrators of conventional conversion narratives, they do not configure the reader as convert exclusively to convert them to Christianity or any other particular

faith. Rather, this function of the conversion narrative becomes a part of the larger strategy of constructing privacy and converting readers into the ideal reader of their autobiography.

From the very beginning of both texts, these narrators signal that they will employ the evangelical conversion pattern, but with a few key revisions: Jane updates the Christian conversion narrative with a female version of the Romantic quest, and Besant replaces Christianity with the spiritualist-based perspective of the Theosophical society. Despite the fact that both narrators apply the conversion pattern to systems other than Christianity, by invoking the genre, they enter into a kind of contract with their readers. When they announce their intention to follow the structural pattern of the conversion narrative, these narrators promise their readers a familiar kind of reading experience, one that includes an intimacy with the narrator which leads the reader to an equally personal introspection. It is part of the autobiographical contract: our experience will be changed by our reading about the experiences of others.

Jane establishes this intimacy with her reader by letting us read over her shoulder in the sanctuary of the curtained window-seat, and thus share her tortured imprisonment in the red room. The novel begins with a scene of meditative reading, just as *Pilgrim's Progress* does, but instead of scriptures, Jane pores over the illustrations in Bewick's *History of Birds*, which, like another favorite book, *Gulliver's Travels*, signals her fascination with other lands and feeds her longing to "escape from insupportable oppression" (12). After a dramatic confrontation with her Aunt Reed, in which she boldly declares her independence from her, she is left feeling a little unbalanced. She is "left there alone -- winner of the field" and recognizes it as "the hardest battle [she] had

fought and the first victory [she] had gained” (31). The imagery recalls Christian’s spiritual battles in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, except that Jane stands entirely alone, without a guide and with an entirely different set of opponents. The experience leaves her feeling restless, so she wanders out of doors: “I leaned against a gate, and looked into an empty field where no sheep were feeding, where the short grass was nipped and blanched. It was a grey day; a most opaque sky[...]canopied all” (32). The visual imagery is just enough to conjure the opening of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, where Christian is “standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house” (11); he is wont to wander about the fields: “he looked this way and that way as if he would run; yet he stood still...because he could not tell which way to go” (12). If the visual imagery and forlorn tone were not similar enough, Brontë drives home the allusion by having Jane quote Christian’s “lamentable cry”; she says, “I stood a wretched child enough, whispering to myself, ‘What shall I do?’ ‘What shall I do?’ (23). In *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Evangelist comes forward to direct Christian along a path trod by many before him, but in *Jane Eyre*, the moment is sharply interrupted by Bessie, when she calls Jane back to the house and notices her changed mood. Jane considers telling her about her recent confrontation with Aunt Reed, but refrains. She does not seek Bessie’s guidance or that of anyone else -- she seeks to answer the question for herself, refusing to put faith in any one else’s plan for her -- even God’s.

Likewise, the short preface to Annie Besant’s *Autobiography* quickly announces her intentions to both invoke and revise the evangelical conversion narrative. Like Bunyan, Besant claims the only reason to write her story is to offer encouragement and direction to readers whose experiences may be reflected in her own:

It may well be that the story of one may help all, and that the tale of one soul that went out alone into the darkness and on the other side found light, that struggled through the storm and on the other side found Peace, may bring some ray of light and of peace into the darkness and storm of other lives. (i)

This is a rather conventional beginning, and one that immediately emphasizes the relationship between reader and narrator, and the universality of the conversion experience. Besant also invokes the classic Christian association of conversion with “light,” following the New Testament example of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus: “Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him” (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Acts 9.3). Though she uses the familiar language of Christian conversion, she does not immediately identify the source of the “light” and “peace” that she has found. Instead, she begins directly and consistently to replace traditional Christian light with the spiritual enlightenment she gains upon her conversion to Theosophy. In fact, the “darkness” in this passage refers to the dark events that precipitated the end of the Christian period of her life, and the “storms” certainly include the persecution by Christians that she suffered during her periods of Atheism and controversial activism. But instead of immediately alienating herself from readers who might not share her skepticism or embrace the tenets of Theosophy, she emphasizes what she and all her readers have in common: “the same anxieties, the same griefs, the same yearning hopes, the same passionate desire for knowledge” (i).

While the preface remains vague about her intention to displace Christianity in her conversion narrative, the first chapter is explicit. It begins with a record of her birth and some details of her genealogy, but wedged between these two conventional

autobiographical practices is a reference to her astrological sign and a tangential commentary on the current state of astrology. She never mentions astrology again throughout the rest of her autobiography, but the careful placement of this reference is critical, because it immediately displaces a Christian reading of her own birth with an alternative form of “providence.”

A second strategy for creating intimacy with the reader is the consistent development of the orphan motif. Bunyan’s Christian and the Wordsworthian wanderer of *The Prelude* are both good examples of how narrators of spiritual autobiographies often identify emotionally and spiritually with the orphan or alien, finding themselves alone on the journey, marginalized at every turn. The classic “dark night of the soul” experience is the ultimate isolating experience, one in which the pilgrim feels cut off even from God. Both Jane and Besant make use of this tradition, tapping into the Victorian cult of sympathy and creating a sense of intimacy with their readers. Their readers play the role of those missing intimates, friends, or parents as they hear the narrator’s life story.

The ten-year-old Jane is the iconic nineteenth-century orphan. From the beginning of *Jane Eyre*, she is separated from her natural parents by their death and ostracized by her adoptive family -- not because she is poor and parent-less, but because of her temperament, which conforms to no known model in their narrow world view. They find her to be an unlovable and “uncongenial alien.” Even Bessie is puzzled by Jane’s skittish, fearful behavior, and Jane detects that she is unsure of how to nurture her. At Lowood, Jane experiences some happy acceptance from Helen Burns and Miss Taylor, but even these dear friends stop short of being kindred spirits. Jane “cannot

comprehend” Helen’s “doctrine of endurance.” Even Miss Taylor, who plays the role of Jane’s “mother, governess and companion,” strikes Jane as an incomplete role model. When she leaves Lowood, Jane quickly emancipates herself from Miss Taylor’s influence; she says, “my mind had put off all it had borrowed of Miss Temple” (72). Brontë then assigns Jane the position of one of the nineteenth century’s most recognizable symbols of alienation, the governess. She is an adult orphan, neither natural child nor mistress of the home, she occupies a position higher than a servant but lower than the students she teaches. Jane feels her marginalization keenly, especially as she begins to desire a more equal relationship with Rochester, and the narrative of servitude quickly merges with that of domestic romance. Her contrasting illustrations of herself and Blanche Ingram vividly illustrate the fact that she does not match the culturally inscribed image for Rochester’s most suitable mate. When she is chosen over Blanche, her greatest disappointment is not simply that Rochester’s first wife is still alive, but that he offers to make her his mistress, which would once again destine her to the margins -- she’d be neither honorable wife nor dishonorable prostitute but confined within the space between the two. The failure to find equality and the lack of understanding on Rochester’s part contribute to a devastating disillusionment, and Jane escapes. Finally, the sense of loneliness and isolation Jane has felt throughout adolescence is recapitulated by her dark-night-of-the-soul experience on the moor, where she is cold, lost, and literally homeless.

While Brontë has the novelist’s liberty of assigning Jane an orphan childhood in order to fully illustrate the idea of spiritual alienation, Besant is limited by the remembered details of her childhood. Not only did she live happily with both parents

until her father's death when she was five, she also enjoyed a warm, devoted relationship with her mother up through her early adult life. Of her mother, she remembers, "she and I scarcely left each other; my love for her was an idolatry, hers for me a devotion" (27). Nevertheless, Besant must have recognized the symbolic value of orphan-hood in her culture, including its power to elicit sympathy, and carefully aligns her spiritual journey with that of a orphaned pilgrim. Long before she renounced Christianity, for example, her Christian practice was radically different from her beloved mother's, which was conventional, civilized and tame. To Annie, "this dainty and well-bred piety seemed perilously like Laodicean lukewarmness" (20). Annie herself was devout, fanatic, and emotional, and her mother complained that she was "too religious":

My headlong vigor of convictions and practice often jarred on her as alien from the delicate balance and absence of extremes that should characterize the gentlewoman. She was of the old regime; I of the stuff from which fanatics are made. (21)

That she uses the term "alien" to contrast herself with her mother is telling, and it characterizes her experience throughout her Christian period. Despite being "too religious" for her mother's taste, she has a hard time identifying with the fervent evangelicalism she is exposed to at school. While her mother had offered her a gentlewoman's "lukewarm" Christianity, her tutor, Miss Marryat was of the "strictest set of evangelicals" and encouraged her students to observe the Sabbath, take food to the poor, recite hymns and scripture, teach Sunday School, and practice public prayer. Besant took some pride in her ability to pray well and to recite long passages of scripture, but she encountered a contrast between the lack of conviction in her heart and

the appearance of conviction in her actions. Though she was able to play the part, she nevertheless felt like an outsider.

Besant's early sense of alienation functions in several ways throughout her autobiography. Her inability to identify a conversion experience in her youth was so common in other autobiographies of the period that it had become a convention in and of itself. In this respect she aligns herself with the scores of readers raised in Evangelical homes who felt excluded from -- or pressured to mimic in order to conform to -- the epiphanic Christian conversion experience. But Besant's sense of isolation also works in a special way in the context of her journey toward Theosophy: it serves as evidence that even from her earliest memories, she was developing an unconventional, heightened sense of spirituality in a culture that offered no satisfactory outlets for "fanatics" such as herself (21).

For example, Besant began dreaming of martyrdom in her adolescence, but in adulthood settles for what she deems the next best thing -- marriage to a clergyman. In this way her marriage to Reverend Besant is correlative to Jane's "new servitude" as a governess because she enters into it as a second best choice. This stage of Besant's life also resembles Jane's in that during this period she encounters intense ostracism and grows disillusioned. Besant finds a painful contrast between the life she imagined for a clergyman's wife and the dull reality of meaningless conversations with other married women -- she found herself placed on a pedestal as role model to all, but friend to none. Additionally, she entered into marriage naively, with no concept of the realities of sex, nor of the abuses her husband would be capable of. She quickly learned that her passion

for intellectual and spiritual stimulation was more of a threat than a boon to Reverent Besant. She says:

All my eager, passionate enthusiasm, so attractive to men in a young girl, were doubtless incompatible with “the solid comfort of a wife,” and I must have been inexpressibly tiring to the Rev. Frank Besant [...] – a most undesirable partner to sit in the lady’s armchair on the domestic rug before the fire. (57)

Just as Jane contrasts herself with the pretty but vapid Blanche Ingram, Besant is aware that she does not fit the culturally inscribed image of the female suited to the “lady’s armchair.”

The disillusionment created by her unhappy marriage and the near-fatal illness of her infant daughter sends Besant into a period of despair, depression, and thoughts of suicide that correspond to Jane’s lonely night on the moor. Besant summarizes the accumulation of painful events from this period in her life:

I had been visiting the poor a good deal, and had marked the patient suffering of their lives; my idolised mother had been defrauded by a lawyer she trusted, and was plunged into debt by his non-payment of the sums that should have passed through his hands to others; my own bright life had been enshrouded by pain and rendered to me degraded by an intolerable sense of bondage; and here was my helpless, sinless babe tortured for weeks and left frail and suffering. (63)

She begins to blame this suffering upon the very God to whom she had passionately dedicated her life. At this point she says, “I did not yet dream of denial, but I would no longer kneel” (63). She feels tortured by the prospect of losing her faith, and the confusion nearly leads her to suicide. Mental and emotional anguish lead to physical exhaustion, and she reaches her lowest point, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

In the evangelical narrative, narrators are brought to their lowest point to be raised up by God, a pattern which functions again and again as a testimony to God’s mercy and faithfulness. Jane Eyre and Annie Besant follow suit, but only up to a point.

They bring their reader with them through their lowest moments, and until this point they leave open the possibility that the conventional pattern of redemption will dominate. The reader may yet believe that the narrator has potential to be redeemed in conventional Christian, or at least Victorian terms. However, just after they bring their readers all the way through the stage of despair, they then make their most radical revision of the evangelical conversion narrative by replacing the Christian redeemer with a secular one. Of course it can be argued that Jane's prayerfulness during her self-exile qualifies her story as a Christian spiritual autobiography, but this argument is largely unconvincing to many readers, especially her contemporaries, who complained that her strong self-reliance was disrespectful, selfish and un-Christian. At best, she de-emphasizes the power of Christian redemption by coupling it with Romantic humanism. Besant goes a step further and openly rejects a Christian reading of her experience. She does not read her emergence from physical exhaustion and spiritual despair as an example of divine intervention, and instead of returning to her former faith with greater vigor, she grows more confident in her ability to reason her way out of Christianity and into Theism.

The most compelling illustration of this move in Besant's *Autobiography* is the passage in which she discovers her gift for public speaking:

The Spring of 1873 brought me knowledge of a power that was to mould much of my future life. I delivered my first lecture, but delivered it to rows of empty pews in Sibsey Church. A queer whim took me that I would like to know how "it felt" to preach, and vague fancies stirred in me that I could speak if I had the chance. I saw no platform in the distance, nor had any idea of possible speaking in the future dawned upon me, and I felt as though I had something to say and was able to say it. So locked alone in the great, silent church, whither I had gone to practice some organ exercises, I ascended the pulpit steps and delivered my first lecture on the inspiration of the Bible. I shall never forget the feeling of power

and delight -- but especially power -- that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles, and the passion in me broke into balanced sentences and never paused for musical cadence or for rhythmical expression. (81)

Under the cover of practicing the organ -- a perfectly acceptable pastime for the clergyman's wife -- Besant slides easily into the pulpit. This action is dense with symbolism, and none of it is lost on Besant the narrator: the movement toward the pulpit mimics a response to the evangelical altar call, but instead of coming forward to accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, she comes forward to reject him. By taking a step further and occupying the pulpit, she challenges her husband and all the authority he represents -- including his supposedly God-given authority to rule over her as pastor and as husband. She also replaces his orthodox theology with her impromptu sermon based on her own (increasingly unorthodox) opinion about "The Inspiration of the Bible." She drowns out the conventional patriarchal voice with her own -- and hearing that voice for the first time is a delightfully powerful experience.

At this point in her narrative she is still between faiths, at a liminal space in her spiritual journey, having rejected the divinity of Christ and suspecting that she is well on her way to losing faith in God altogether. While she had methodically eliminated the orthodox beliefs she could no longer hold, she had not yet determined what, if anything, would play the role that Christianity had once played so prominently in her life. Interestingly, it is not confirmation of faith in an old or new creed that gives her a sense of joy, but within this void it is the affirming discovery of the gift of speech that gives her a sense of "power and delight," and promises to sustain her through the storms that follow.

Strangely, however, Besant seems to waffle between claiming agency in this experience and attributing it to some vague, generic higher power. At the same time that she revels in the “power and delight” that she feels upon hearing her own voice, she also describes her speech as something beyond her own control, more perfect and melodious in its spontaneity than any prepared sermon. In the context of her conversion to Theosophy, Besant might be implicitly attributing the “whim” and “vague fancies” and the “gift” to a higher power, and might even mean to suggest that her speaking ability was a skill developed in a past life. However this reading is entirely dependent upon the context of the second autobiography, for the passage appears almost identical in the first one, written long before her conversion to Theosophy when her rationalism would have prevented her from claiming any intervention from a spiritual force.

As the passage continues, so does her effort to differentiate herself from this anonymous source of power -- she implies that whatever power has blessed her with this gift of speech also blesses her with a vision:

All I wanted then was to see the church full of upturned faces, alive with throbbing sympathy, instead of the dreary emptiness of silent pews. And as though in a dream the solitude peopled and I saw the listening faces and the eager eyes, and as the sentences flowed unbidden from my lips and my own tones echoed back to me from the pillars of the ancient church, I knew of a verity that the gift of speech was mine, and that if ever -- and then it seemed so impossible! - - if ever the chance came to me of public work, this power of melodious utterance should at least win hearing for any message I had hoped to bring. (93)

In this passage, she configures herself as passive as she receives a vision in which “the solitude peopled.” She describes her speech as something that happens to her, rather than something she does, as the “sentences flowed unbidden.” And she even disconnects herself from her own voice, describing the way it “echoed back to [her] from the pillars

of the ancient church.” She has fully spiritualized the experience, carefully configuring herself as subject to a power outside of herself -- yet never identifying the source of that power. Where the conventional conversion narrative would quickly name this experience a Christian miracle, Besant fails to name it at all. By configuring herself as passive, she demonstrates her fluency in the tropes of conversion language but also obscures the fact that the “power and delight” she feels comes entirely from within herself.

It is Besant herself who “peoples” the “solitude” and creates her own audience in Sisbey chapel. This is a fitting image for the steps a gifted speaker takes to sway her audience, constructing both herself and her listeners. It is even more fitting with the act of autobiography, in which the narrator not only constructs the self, but must both imagine and impress her readers.

This strategy seems to underlie the next section of both of these autobiographical texts. Both narrators are acutely aware that their readers will criticize them for replacing Christian redemption with a secular alternatives. What readers may not initially recognize is the way these narrators use this section of their autobiographies to argue that Victorian culture had already create its own alternative, nominally Christian form of redemption for the fallen woman. Both narratives use these competing narratives in order to convert readers to a more compassionate, inclusive definition of redemption.

Both Annie Besant’s and Jane Eyre’s “dark night of the soul” corresponds directly to the point in their lives at which they are most clearly marked as “fallen women.” Jane arrives at Marsh end without a penny to her name and presenting an ambiguous appearance – she appears genteel but acts like a beggar. This ambiguity alone makes her

suspicious, and the secret she carries about her potential relationship with Rochester has the potential to convict her. Besant's near suicide and physical exhaustion are no doubt partly caused by her anxiety about breaking cultural mores. She knows that her decision to leave the church and leave her husband will have grave consequences for her life. The private anguish that she recently survived would be recapitulated in the public scorn that was sure to follow an apostate divorcee. The sections of the spiritual autobiography that might conventionally be reserved for glorification of Christian redemption and testimony to God's faithfulness become, in the case of Jane Eyre, a near-parody of Victorian forms of redemption and, in the case of Annie Besant, a bitter indictment of them.

Jane works her way through a series of transformations that have very little resemblance to the classic signs of spiritual growth, but in Victorian culture had the power to redeem the fallen woman. First, her upstanding character shines through her rumpled, beggarly appearance and wins her admittance to the Rivers' hearth-space, where she continues to prove herself worthy of their humble but honorable domesticity and scholarly pursuits. Good character is good currency in Victorian culture, and the discovery of her blood kinship to the Rivers helps to confirm their instincts about her worthiness. Next, her convenient inheritance actually raises her above her cousins in socioeconomic terms and brings her back into contact with Aunt Reed, who confesses that she treated Jane poorly and that her own children have not fared so well. Finally, as if character, kinship, and money were not enough, she gains the attention of St. John as a potential wife and partner on the missionary field. Marriage to St. John points her toward a kind of Celestial City that offers complete self-effacement, an enactment of the

Victorian gospel of good works -- and therefore full redemption. After proving herself redeemable in these terms Jane suddenly rejects them all, and returns directly to Rochester. Though the circumstances have changed, and she goes back to him on her own terms, the fact remains that by returning to Rochester she returns to the site of temptation, and writes it as an alternative to the Victorian Celestial City she has rejected.

We see Besant making similar moves in the post-despair section of her autobiography. Besant wants to establish creditability with her Victorian readers, but at the same time she critiques the terms on which Victorians would give it to her. She appeals to the Victorian cult of sentimentality, for example, particularly the sentimental relationship between mother and child, by placing emphasis on her positive relationships with her mother and her daughter. She also tries to justify her separation from Reverend Besant and her relationship with married atheist Charles Bradlaugh. She argues that her partnership with Bradlaugh, though outside the boundaries of Christian decorum was a superior, more equitable relationship than her marriage to Reverend Besant.

For example, early in the autobiography, the chapter entitled "Marriage" begins with a painful explanation of how she was predisposed to make the mistake of marrying Reverend Besant, but the story of her betrothal is abruptly interrupted by a lengthy account of a Fenian riot in Manchester, the ensuing trials, and finally the execution of the Fenian leaders. She shares her observations from the trial, which she attended with "Lawyer Roberts" a champion of the poor, and her "first tutor in Radicalism." She also mentions Charles Bradlaugh for the first time in this passage. Years after the Fenian

trial, she learns that Bradlaugh had played a key role in the defense of the Fenian rebels. After citing a long passage from Bradlaugh's argument in the case, she returns to the story of her marriage just as abruptly as she had abandoned it earlier in the chapter.

The sharp juxtaposition of her marriage with her introduction to religious doubt and political radicalism has a powerful effect. She purposefully writes about her marriage and her awakening radicalism simultaneously, in order to contrast the world she was expected to participate in with the world she was more naturally drawn to – and would later convert to. As she claims that she was thoroughly unfit for marriage and implies that she would have been better matched with a “marriage” to radicalism, this juxtaposition serves to foreshadow her later relationship with Bradlaugh and to set up the contrast between the the unhappy, abusive, but “christian” marriage to Besant with the happy, equitable, but unsanctioned relationship with Bradlaugh.

Later in the autobiography she makes a similar kind of interruption. In the midst of detailing her political and social work, she shifts to a more domestic portrait of herself and Bradlaugh. She portrays their “holidays” together as a sweet innocent courtship, including long walks, visits to tea rooms, her watching him fish, him teasing her, and their long talks about dreams for the future. She describes their daily routine, working silently, side by side during the day, breaking for lunch, and relaxing in the evening with a game of cards. This portrait of intimate domesticity seems to serve several purposes. It evades the question of whether or not the two were involved in an affair, emphasizing the innocent simplicity of their friendship, and offering a host of details about their time together. But at the same time, this portrait also suggests the Victorian domesticity as a core value could exist outside the constructs of marriage and traditional

Christianity. She cleverly appeals to these values at the same time that she critiques their rigidity within Victorian culture.

Though her personal and professional partnership with Bradlaugh was damaging to her creditability in her custody battle with Reverend Besant, and her narrative of radicalism and socialism was still offensive to her contemporaries, Besant's professional partnership with Bradlaugh builds her creditability within the growing secular subculture. Within that subculture, through her alliance with Bradlaugh, Besant had found a group of people who depended on her speaking skills to promote their causes and who admired her courage and leadership. In this sense, the long sections of her autobiography detailing her political activism in the service of rationalism and socialism are comparable to the kind of life that St. John offers Jane -- because they function as an alternative set of Victorian values that have the potential to redeem her in the eyes of Victorian readers. As she constructs her relationship with Bradlaugh as an equitable personal and political partnership, she also constructs it as a redemptive one -- more personally fulfilling and more valuable to humanity than the facade of marriage with Reverend Besant.

At this point in Besant's autobiography, Besant has established her contributions to social justice as compensation for her breaches in Victorian decorum. Having satisfied cultural expectations within a rationalist/socialist agenda, this point in her autobiography has marks of a conclusion, just as Jane's story had great potential to end with a marriage to St. John Rivers. This impression of completion is partially supported by the fact that her first autobiography ended with her Socialist period. But then, just as abruptly as Jane leaves St. John and returns to Rochester, Annie Besant rejects all the

precepts of rationalism upon which she had built her creditability, and embraces the teachings of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society.

The transition to the final stage of the spiritual journey in both texts is characterized not only by abruptness but also by supernatural intervention. While still at Moor House, knowing that what St. John offers as a marriage partner is inadequate for her needs and desires, Jane listens for guidance and hears Rochester's voice calling to her. She wastes no time returning to him, abandoning all the good will she had found among the Rivers, and wordlessly rejecting St. John's marriage proposal.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar manner, Besant hears a voice that beckons her to continue her search for that "something more" than what the Socialist agenda offered, something that "was needed for the cure of social ills" (224). As she begins studying spiritualism, she too hears a voice that convinces her to take action, to change the course of her life once again:

At last, sitting alone in deep thought, as I had become accustomed to do after the sun had set, filled with an intense but nearly hopeless longing to solve the riddle of life and mind, I heard a Voice that was later to become to me the holiest sound on earth, bidding me to take courage for the light was near. (226)

A few weeks later, she recognizes that voice in *The Secret Doctrine* by H.P. Blavatsky, and she immediately arranges to meet the author, and then with very little hesitation, signs on as a member of the Theosophical Society. She pauses to consider the fact that her conversion to Theosophy will cost her her hard-won esteem of the public and Charles Bradlaugh's approval. Bradlaugh had already criticized her move to socialism,

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<sup>7</sup> In "The Merging of Spiritualities: Jane Eyre as a Missionary of Love," J. Jeffrey Franklin identifies Jane's experience of hearing Rochester while miles away from him as an example of ESP; supporting his argument that in *Jane Eyre* Christian spiritualism is set at odds with "one or more culturally archaic and blasphemous spiritualisms."

and now, she wonders, “must he suffer the pang of seeing his co-worker, his co-fighter, of whom he had been so proud, to whom he had been so generous, go over to the opposing hosts and leave the ranks of Materialism?” (228).

Just as Jane replaces St. John with Rochester, Besant replaces Bradlaugh with Blavatsky. In fact, after joining the Theosophical society, Besant visits Blavatsky, and her description of their meeting suggests an inverted marriage proposal, with Besant kneeling before her, asking to become her student:

I went over to [H.P.B.], bent down and kissed her[...]I knelt down before her and clasped her hands in mine, looking straight into her eyes. “My answer is, will you accept me as your pupil, and give me the honor of proclaiming you my teacher in the face of the world?” Her stern, set face softened, the unwonted gleam of tears sprang to her eyes; then, with a dignity more than regal, she placed her hand upon my head. “You are a noble woman. May Master bless you.”(229)

Besant’s conversion to Theosophy liberates her from the Victorian doctrine of good works and renews the intense spirituality of her youth but redirects that spirituality from a Christian to a Theosophical end. Her new faith emphasizes love and equality and rejects the material world favor of a heightened spiritual awareness. This move toward an alternative version of her past is not entirely unlike Jane’s return to Rochester, in the sense that Jane’s renewed relationship with Rochester is based on a more equal partnership than the one he first proposed. Her rejection of the material world is represented by the fact that they find their dream home at simple Ferndean, which Rochester had previously deemed unfit even for the abject Bertha. Rochester’s physical blindness presumably alters and improves his spiritual vision, so that he and Jane are able to live together on a higher spiritual plane.

Both conclusions have similar problems. On the one hand, they may both be read as escapes – final liberation from the Victorian codes challenged in previous sections of the texts. Jane Eyre rejects all conventional forms of Victorian redemption and finds freedom and equality in the arms of her would-be seducer. Besant eschews conventional Christianity as well as the rationalist foundations of secular morality by embracing Theosophy. And as she herself becomes a leader in that movement, she gains the power to help write its rules. Yet the abruptness of both conclusions leaves readers questioning these narrators' sense of autonomy. How is submission to Rochester any different than the conventional domestic romance? How is Besant's conversion to Theosophy any different than a unquestioning evangelical conversion to Christianity? Are these narrators empowered -- or crippled by these abrupt changes of heart?

Sternlieb argues that in the plot of the novel, Jane is indeed crippled by her marriage to Rochester, but in the plot of narration, we can see Jane demonstrating a compensatory empowerment. As Sternlieb describes it, Jane “cripples in order to empower” (16). In the plot of the novel, she replaces St. John with Rochester, but in the plot of narration, she replaces Rochester with herself. In concealing her manuscript from her husband, Jane creates both a sense of privacy and a sense of authority by making her version of their story more prominent than Rochester's.

The idea that Jane must write her manuscript in secret in order to enjoy an unprecedented level of privacy may seem somewhat inapplicable to Besant. As a non-fictional autobiographer and public figure, she openly writes and openly publishes her autobiography for all to read, knowing that her version of her life story may contrast with unofficial versions that are circulating among both her supporters and her

detractors. Yet she does make a similar move by writing her autobiography after the deaths of Bradlaugh and Blavatsky -- she tells her own version of their story without their knowledge and replaces their authority with her own.

Again and again, throughout her many conversions, from Christianity to Theism, to Atheism to Socialism and then to Theosophy, Besant is consistently most affected by her own ability to convert others. She is converted to a life of converting others, and she clearly recognizes the conventional, evangelical conversion narrative as a powerful rhetorical tool. In writing her autobiography, and constructing a conversion experience for her reader, she must have felt that same sense of “delight” and “especially power” that she felt when sermonizing to an imaginary audience in Sisbey chapel. It is not the conversion itself that is prominent, nor the beliefs that she converted to; instead the focus remains on her ability to convert her audience, to convince listeners that what is performed in public is a faithful representation of what has occurred in private.

Like Jane, Besant may appear to cripple herself in the sudden conversion to Theosophy, a movement that stands for many things she once stood against. Thus this final conversion seems to be an uncharacteristic act of submission. But like Jane's move from St. John to Rochester, Besant's shift in alliance from Bradlaugh to Blavatsky is a shift from the known to the unknown. St. John spells out exactly what Jane's life will be like if she marries him and serves as his partner in missions. Rochester proposes a kind of life that Jane cannot accept, but the terms on which she does marry him are not fully defined. She says “Reader, I married him” but she does not disclose the full meaning of this alternative, unprecedented domestic arrangement. In a similar way, Besant's conversion is a conversion from the knowable, material world to the unknowable

spiritual realm. While Besant outlines the principles of Theosophy elsewhere, she does not provide a full explanation of the faith in her autobiography. She does not record private conversations with Bradlaugh about her conversion to Theosophy but reproduces both of their public statements on the matter as they appeared in *The National Reformer*. And eventually, like Jane supplanting Rochester as the leader in their paradise, Besant supplants Blavatsky as the leader of the Theosophical Society, developing its principles and indoctrinating members herself. Simply put, both narrators create a sense of intimacy with their readers by showing how they move through the conversion experience but not fully revealing what it is they have converted to. In carefully choosing the details of their life stories that will create a conversion experience in their readers, these autobiographers' own conversions remain elusive.

## Chapter Two: Aurora Leigh and Marianne Farningham

In the previous chapter, I considered the way Annie Besant's autobiography parallels the conversion narrative as revised in *Jane Eyre*, as well as the careful construction of the reader as a participant in that conversion experience. I argued how, as autobiographers, Annie Besant and Jane Eyre invested a great deal of rhetorical energy in constructing an ideal reader. In this chapter I shift attention to another point on the rhetorical triangle, considering the careful construction of the speaker, or narrator, in women's autobiography. Again I pair a non-fictional autobiography with an earlier fictional one: *A Working Woman's Life* (1907) by journalist Mary Anne Hearn (published under her best-known pen name, "Marianne Farningham") and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. I argue that Mary Anne Hearn and Aurora Leigh invest a great deal of energy in constructing themselves as ideal narrators – narrators offering themselves as new models of literary heroine. To do so, each author must anticipate, respond to, and substantiate stereotypes associated with the other: Aurora Leigh requires the working class (represented by Marian Erle) as foil to illuminate her own successes, and likewise Marianne Farningham must fashion herself as a working-class, realistic alternative to the fantasy of becoming a "famous" woman author. By paying attention to the ways these narrators anticipate one another, we can identify a host of questions about the relationship between a fantasy of the literary heroine and the reality of the working class woman writer. Reading both texts in terms of the evangelical conversion narrative, with its trope of temptation and rebirth, allows us to see how each narrator constructs herself as both muse and temptation to the other.

Mary Anne Hearn was born into a typical nineteenth-century, evangelical working class home in 1834, in the village of Farningham in the Darent river valley. Her father was a shoemaker and village postman; her mother's father was a paper maker and preacher. Both Rebecca and Joseph Hearn taught Sunday school at the Particular Baptist Church in the nearby village of Eynsford and passed on their non-conformist values to their children. As a child, Hearn thrived in the village church community; however, like most non-conformist, working class families, a combination of meager means and religious prejudice (on the part of high-church institutions against non-conformists and vice versa) meant sporadic school attendance for Hearn and her four younger siblings. To supplement her intermittent education, Hearn studied privately, often reading books and magazines instead of helping with chores. When she was twelve years old, her mother died, and as the oldest daughter Hearn was called to take over many of the household duties. Her father was sympathetic to her desire to return to school and taught her shoe-binding skills so she could pay room and board and attend school instead of keeping house.

Hearn began her writing career by publishing her first poem at about age eighteen. Her writing experiments had been both encouraged and harshly critiqued by John Whittemore, whom she met when he became Reverend of Eynsford chapel in 1852. Whittemore also served as editor of *The Baptist Messenger* and divided his time between pastoring at Eynsford on the weekends and editing in London during the week. Initially his criticism caused Hearn to keep her poetry a secret, so she felt “keen joy, not unmixed with pride” when he publicly praised one of her poems that was read aloud at a funeral. The poem was presented as anonymous, and she was convinced “nothing would

have induced him to speak thus had he known the words were mine” (Farningham 62). Later, when he discovered she had published a poem in another magazine, he invited her to join him in several publishing projects. When he founded *The Christian World* in 1857 with publisher James Clark, he invited Hearn to write a weekly column, featuring her verses and short prose sketches under the title “Echoes from the Valley” and under the pseudonym Marianne Farningham.

Hearn was prolific, maintaining a steady writing career up until the very end of her life. After Whittemore's death she continued to write for both *The Christian World* and its sister publication, *The Sunday School Times*. She later served as editor of *The Sunday School Times* for more than twenty years. She also wrote a series of biographical sketches, including *Famous Women Authors* (1890), for another publisher but under the name of “Eva Hope,” because she always insisted that “Marianne Farningham” was the property of Messrs. Clark and Co. In all, she published forty-one books and thousands of poems and short prose sketches, and built a reputation as a beloved Sunday School teacher and traveling lecturer. Hearn earned enough money to retire to a cottage at Barmouth, where she became friends with her landlady, a Mrs. Talbot, who was a lifelong friend of John Ruskin and who introduced Hearn to another neighbor, Frances Power Cobbe. The last chapters of Hearn's autobiography record her retirement from teaching, her time at Barmouth and the fiftieth anniversary celebration of *The Christian World*. Mary Anne Hearn died March 16, 1909, two years after the publication of her autobiography.

Hearn's obituary in *The Christian World* testifies to her influence: the anonymous author doubts “if any woman journalist of the last half-century gave so

much pleasure and gentle inspiration to her readers” and admires Hearn's humble aspirations:

she did not write for fame, but to express her feelings, and to help her readers who underwent the same experiences. Her verses were the favourite poetry of tens of thousands of readers, and among them highly cultured men and women who found in Marianne Farningham a gift of speaking from heart to hearts. Sometimes she rose to a high level of lyric beauty, but she was content if she could only wed to words the simple, healthy, homely feeling of the heart that “lives by admiration, hope, and love.” (“Death of Marianne Farningham” 23)

This adulation attests to the accessibility and popularity of Hearn's poems and sketches, while also subtly revealing assumptions about what constitutes “success” as a writer.

The author openly identifies several dichotomies: writing for “fame” is opposed to writing for “feeling”; attracting a “highly cultured” reader is desirable, and rising up to a “high level of lyric beauty” is acceptable when balanced by contentment with a “simple, healthy, homely feeling of the heart.” Even in praising Hearn's body of work, this posthumous review reveals an evangelical and working-class prejudice against certain kinds of writing. It identifies two opposing narratives: had she pursued “fame” or only “lyric beauty,” Hearn would have fallen under suspicion, but instead she publicly resisted these temptations, and thus her career is sanctified, chiefly by its humility.

This prejudice against certain kinds of writing, I refer to as both “evangelical” and “working class” because *The Christian World* was founded for the purpose of creating a religious alternative to secular magazines, and its two sister publications *The Sunday School Times* (edited by Hearn) and *The Christian World Magazine* (edited by Emma Jane Worboise) were priced at a half-penny and a half-shilling a piece in order to make them available to the poorest of readers. *The Christian World* was non-sectarian but decidedly evangelical. As editors both Hearn and Worboise found themselves in a

unique position to provide a body of journalism that would edify their readers with moral and religious literature. Worboise writes “it is of little use to decry the objectionable popular literature of the day if something better, yet quite as palatable, be not provided!” (qtd. in Melnyk 132). As women, they were also proving that women's work could include writing that was more than “objectionable popular literature.”

This was a challenge among the working-class readers, for working-class culture typically considered the desire to write and self-educate to be an evasion of one's duties toward work and family. As Ursula Howard observes, this belief was even stronger for working-class women than it was for men:

The yearning and the longing to write, for women, were born in even deeper conflict with outside pressures than was the case for men. The process of overcoming fundamental opposition sometimes meant forcing underground the whole learning process until such time as it could bubble up again as completed fact. As long as it caused no disruption to the needs of the family or employer it might even be permitted to flow on to lucrative rewards or improved status for the family. (93)

In other words, Hearn's culture tells her that she must either suppress her desire to write or find a way to profit by it. Hearn does both, keeping her studying and writing secret for as long as she can, and later managing, despite her lack of formal education, to turn her writing in to a career—a career that allows her to support her family and live independently for the rest of her life. But Hearn takes an additional precaution; to ensure that her writing will not violate working-class values, she limits her range as a writer, sanctifying her career by writing only for a working class audience and largely for religious publications. And as her obituary attests, she succeeded.

Hearn's own prejudices about the relationships between class, virtue, and writing are nuanced and complex, and as a result her autobiography is characterized by a

consistent ambivalence between two conflicting desires: the desire to write her way out of the working class and the desire to remain loyal to her evangelical, working-class roots. One way Hearn expresses this ambivalence is to borrow from two different generic conventions: the evangelical conversion narrative and the *Künstlerroman*. As a subgenre of the *Bildungsroman*, the *Künstlerroman* also traces the growth of an individual, specifically the artist, from childhood to maturity. Thus the *Künstlerroman*, like the *Bildungsroman* has an evangelical function: it sets forth a model of self-introspection and maturation, yet it does not necessarily depend on a Christian – or even an overtly religious – telos.

Even though these two narratives potentially conflict, with one modeling redemption through God and the other through art, Hearn needs both genres to tell the full story of her experience as an evangelical and a working writer, and to align herself with the fantasy of a literary heroine. As the narrator and dual heroine of both genres, she becomes uniquely suited to voice the experience of the “working woman” (of her autobiography's title), whose work is to write for evangelical publications. Invoking both genres also allows her to address a broad audience: both her loyal working-class readers and the broader reading public. Her success is indicated by the fact that her autobiography was the most popular of all her forty-one books. By setting up both autobiographical genres in the same text, she exploits the dissonance between the two to attempt to convert all of her readers to a new persona, that of the working-class, literary heroine.

In the first few pages of her autobiography she quickly claims both narrative traditions by identifying two subtly different legacies: on one page she describes her

deep respect for her maternal grandfather – whose sermons always left her “quite bewildered,” and on the next pages she describes her admiration for her paternal grandmother – whose poetry was beautiful and whose prayers, she remembers “always seemed to take me right to heaven” (12-13). The male-authored, church-authorized sermons earn her respect, but lead her only so far on her spiritual journey, while the female-authored poems and prayers promise to sustain along her entire pilgrimage, all the way through to the next life. This distinction roughly parallels one between the two genres: one exclusively religious, the other finding a route to spiritual ends via the literary.

Hearn also makes direct references to the way that both genres shaped her imagination and sense of identity. As in most poor and working-class families, the library was limited but included the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*. She notes how the “theology of the day” played out in her consciousness, supplying her imagination with vivid imagery that might have come straight out of *Pilgrim's Progress*:

Hell was a very real thing to me, and I had a curious fancy, when a very young child, that it was underground, and that there was one entrance to it from a certain place just outside Farningham, which was called Whitepost Hill. Many a time when I have been walking up that road along, with a weight of many sins upon my conscience, I have been afraid there would be an earthquake, which would swallow me up; and I have run over it in breathless haste and with panting prayers. (29)

As this passage suggests, the Christian-as-pilgrim allegory so deeply informs her worldview that she sees a literal manifestation of its imagery in her own real neighborhood. She also makes note of another text that she cherished, a well-known example of spiritual life-writing, the 1837 autobiography of George Muller, which she refers to as a “spiritual romance.” Muller's story makes a deep impression on her – she knew him

personally as a “great hero of faith” who worked to provide care for a growing number of orphans; she expresses a deep respect for his “simple child-like trust” in the way he ran his household, always asking God rather than individuals for money or supplies needed for his orphanage, and always receiving the resulting donations with gratefulness, but not surprise. She refers to his story as “object lesson to the world”(65).

Hearn recalls that her own prejudice against secular literature persisted until Whittemore convinced her to read *Jane Eyre*: “I had no sleep that night, and it haunted me for many nights afterwards. I had been taught that it was wicked to read novels, and this one marked my departure from that old limitation” (71). It is unclear whether she is haunted by the novel itself or the fact that she dared to read it. Whittemore also gave her a copy of Shakespeare, which caused some outrage among the members of their church; one woman offered to burn it for her, and others advised her not to read it. When she did read it, she was surprised to find expressions that she had always thought were from the Bible (71). The appreciation for *Jane Eyre* and other novels eventually led Hearn to write about the patterns at work in the lives of female authors, which she recorded in *Famous Women Authors* (1890). As she gathered information for this project at the British Library reading room, she was delighted to rub shoulders with “real” writers, perhaps on occasion the very authors she described in *Famous Women Authors*, which included biographical sketches of Mary Somerville, Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot.

But the most compelling evidence for the influence of two competing genres is that Hearn provides two different conversion scenes: one is conventional, religious and expressed in public, the other is non-traditional, literary and private. The religious

conversion recounts her public confession of faith and her request to join the church, and is fully in line with the conventions of the evangelical conversion experience now ritualized in many churches. Those who wished to join the church had to make a public testimony, after which, church leaders would decide whether or not to grant membership. Hearn remembers answering several questions, feeling great anxiety while waiting for the decision to be announced and great relief upon hearing of her acceptance. Her anxiety was exacerbated by her fear that she had not actually experienced a true conversion. Nevertheless, despite her doubts and the rigid formality of the experience, this occasion is marked as sacred.

But this scene pales in comparison to her description of another version of the conversion experience, one that is remarkably more personal and, initially, private. One night she is forced to confess to her father that she has been secretly pursuing a life of letters. She recalls how she would hoard weak tea and candles so that she could stay awake to read and study late at night. She is motivated partly out of her eagerness to learn, and partly out of a sense of shame – ashamed of her ignorance and lack of schooling. One night, a neighbor happens to see her lamp burning in the window and assumes that someone in the home is ill. When her father hears of it, he makes Hearn promise that she will no longer deceive him, that she will no longer pretend to go to bed when she bids him good night. She promises but can only resist the temptation for so long. One night she falls asleep while studying and accidentally sets the room on fire. She is forced to admit her transgression to her father, and to announce her intentions to be, to the best of her ability, a woman of letters. He too experiences a kind of conversion, because this accident convinces him that he should allow her to go back to school. They

agree that she will learn shoe-binding skills so that she can pay for her room and board, and thus make continued education less of a burden on the household<sup>8</sup>

These two conversion experiences are in tension with one another, especially in the sense that the conversion to a life of letters is cast as a transgression of the other, for the literary conversion requires that she break a commandment and disobey her father. This tension is deeply felt throughout her autobiography. When she remembers writing her first poem, an epitaph on a dead toad, she recalls her desire to write as a “burden” to her family. It was a financial burden because the cost of education was often beyond their means, but it was also a burden because it implied aberrant behavior, for reading and writing often caused her to ignore her share of household duties. One of her first spiritual experiences is precipitated by reading a poem by Felicia Hemans that she found in a sailing magazine. It brought her to such an emotional state that she had to step out of doors for fresh air until the baby she had been tending began crying and forced her back indoors. Again, this incident indicates an early awareness that the spiritual experiences created by poetry would always come second to domestic responsibilities and obedience to her parents, behavior sanctioned by her working-class, evangelical community.

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8 Hearn's secrecy about her efforts to self-educate was typical of working-class women writers. However Hearn did have some advantages that other other working-class women did not: for example, her father's willingness to help Hearn return to school suggests that he was more sympathetic to his daughters' interest in education than most working-class fathers, who typically did not maintain a lasting interest in their daughters' education. (Swindells 130). In “Domestic Spaces, Readerly Acts: Reading(,) Gender, and Class in Working-Class Autobiography,” Kelly J. Mays compares Hearn to other working-class autobiographers and notes that Hearn received more schooling than was typical because her family was relatively better off and lived close to her school. Also, she had a positive experience at school, while many other working class girls who craved education had negative experiences in schools where gender roles were reinforced by girls' curriculum that was limited to the domestic arts (355)

This tension persists throughout her autobiography. Even after she makes her “conversion” to her life of letters, and learning to love and appreciate secular literature, the desire to write is often held in check by her evangelical roots. In this context, the implications of Hearn's response to *Jane Eyre* become complex. When Whittemore gave her the book, he said, “Here is a book, my girl, that is thrilling everybody. If you can write like this, you will do something.” Hearn reflects upon this, saying “I wished I could, and have been wishing it every since” (71). This occasion is important as an instance when the autobiographical subject and narrator elide: she uses the incident to demonstrate the origins of her desire to write something (particularly a novel) capable of “thrilling everybody.” She also identifies this desire as a present, ongoing condition. In eliding her past and present desires to write such a book, she turns it into a defining one. But in the context of her conflicted loyalties – between her desire to write well and her desire to remain loyal to her evangelical roots – the meaning is ambiguous. Was she unable to “thrill everybody” with a novel because she lacked talent? Or was it because she resisted the temptation to write something that would “thrill” instead of teach?

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These are not the concerns of the literary heroine who has eliminated the tension between the spiritual conversion narrative and the *Künstlerroman*. In *Aurora Leigh*, the spiritual and secular ends are closely tied to one another, and the tension is instead in the contrast between the Romantic and the Victorian literary heroine, and in the contrast between the male and female author. Aurora freely appropriates elements of the evangelical conversion narrative to serve her purpose of establishing a female

literary heroine for her own age. Her purpose is to convert readers to a new set of expectations for the woman writer.<sup>9</sup>

For example, I read Aurora Leigh's private, ceremony of self-coronation into a life of letters as a self-baptism. She chooses to conduct this ceremony on her birthday, signaling a new birth as she declares herself a new poet for a new age. She explicitly draws parallels between the classical tradition of crowning a poet with laurels, but implicit parallels to Christ's crown of thorns should not be overlooked. For example, before Romney interrupts this private ritual, Aurora's simple ivy crown is a proud symbol of hope and confidence, but during their argument, Aurora removes the crown and drags it along by her side in the dirt. Her declaration of her faith in herself clashes with Romney's awkward marriage proposal and his negative opinion of women's art; thus, after suffering his persecution of her newly-claimed identity, the ivy crown becomes soiled and damaged. Like the crown of thorns placed on Christ's head at the crucifixion, Aurora's ivy crown is transformed into a mockery of its original glory. But instead of discarding, Aurora owns it, bitterly replacing it on her head. What was once a symbol of triumph has been nearly destroyed by Romney's criticism and lack of faith, but then she reclaims it for a new purpose as she vows to continue her career even without his approval. She is fully confident of her calling as a poet, and she makes this public confession of her intention to follow this path.

The intention to evangelize is clearly illustrated in the text, as Barrett Browning anticipates her own success by showing how her fictional counterpart becomes famous.

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9 In "The 'Prophet-Poet's' Book" Christine Chaney also reads *Aurora Leigh* as a persuasive text, identifying it as "a particular form of polemical life narrative that operates by framing narrative subjectivity in ways designed rhetorically to persuade readers of the efficacy of the speaker's claims"(792).

Even before Aurora reaches maturity, as her readers begin to develop a ravenous appetite for her work, and as many readers attempt to emulate her lifestyle, she becomes keenly aware that she is lionized. One devoted reader poses for a portrait with a copy of Aurora's book in hand while wearing an old cloak in the same style that Aurora is known to wear. This devotion to the cult of the female poet is partly set up to ridicule the Romantic, Sapphic myth of the female poetess. As Linda Peterson observes, unlike the Romantic model of the tragic Sapphic poetess, "who achieves fame but is unlucky in love," Aurora Leigh is successful and uncompromising in her pursuit of both career and romance (Peterson 118). The adoration of Aurora announces the birth of a new female role model.

This phenomenon of Aurora-worship is found outside the text as well. Margaret Reynolds observes that Aurora Leigh quickly became an icon before the end of the nineteenth century, recognizable in England and the United States. At Wellesley College, a girls' school in Massachusetts, for example, a portrait of Aurora Leigh was installed in stained glass (Reynolds ix). While Elizabeth Barrett Browning may not have anticipated that Aurora Leigh would be immortalized in stained-glass windows, many of her readers embraced the not-so-subtle implication that Aurora's story offers a new gospel. Just as traditional stained-glass windows raise up the gaze of the illiterate masses, illuminating the Christian story of salvation, the stained glass depicting Aurora Leigh – and the text itself – offer new hope to the ambitious young female student seeking an empowered female role model. But there is one key difference; this icon was not available to those illiterate masses.

Otherwise, Mary Anne Hearn might have been among these young women much sooner. Until Whittemore intervened, her lack of formal education limited her exposure to women artists. Yet she began to search for such a role model from the time she began to read, intensifying her search after her mother died, scouring the monthly magazines for female success stories and lamenting their lack. Her father had given her the magazines to entertain and console her during her grief, but she was distressed to find they contained no stories about young girls like herself.

I was embittered to find only a series of descriptive articles on men who had been poor boys and had risen to be rich and great. Every month I hoped to find the story of some ignorant girl, who, beginning life as handicapped as I, had yet been able by her own efforts and the blessing of God upon them to live a life of usefulness if not greatness. But I believe there was not a woman in the whole series. (44)

Where Hearn longed to read about a female role model, longed to read about a girl who might “live a life of usefulness if not greatness” (44), Aurora sets an example of that “greatness.” In her review of *Aurora Leigh*, Hearn acknowledges and appreciates how Aurora Leigh's story ends in a “final triumph” for art and love. However, while Aurora Leigh was well-established as a literary and cultural icon, it was not an icon available to Hearn. The stained glass image of Aurora Leigh may have been equated with saintliness for educated, upper-middle-class girls in England and America, but Mary Anne Hearn was born into a working class family where education and literacy were not priorities; therefore, she can only encounter *Aurora Leigh* after years of self-education. Even more importantly, Aurora Leigh lacks one primary characteristic of Mary Anne Hearn's ideal role model, for Aurora Leigh did not begin her story as the “ignorant girl,” “handicapped” as Hearn herself was. Instead, Aurora begins her story on track, with

every advantage. Despite her aunt's attempt to cage her, control her education and her social destiny, and despite her years of relative poverty while writing for a living in London, Aurora Leigh had every advantage that Hearn lacked. While Aurora Leigh makes fine distinctions between reading “a score of books on womanhood” (prescribed by her aunt) and reading the poets for “memory” or “hope” (l. 427, l. 729-730), Hearn was simply seeking to read and write – period. While Aurora may have experienced poverty first hand as she began her career in London, she was not also blighted by poor education and ignorance.

Hearn's disgruntlement about the lack of female role models in the monthly magazines is followed by this comment, “I was very bitter and naughty at that time. I did not pray, and I was not anxious to be good.” In this incident, grief and anger over the loss of her mother is tightly bound with a frustrated desire to find a replacement role model in literature. Recognizing this void, she takes the first step toward imagining what would be required to fill it; thus, she begins to imagine a version of Aurora Leigh long before she ever reads and reviews Barrett Browning's novel-poem. In fact, both figures must begin to imagine one another as they construct themselves as literary heroines. Just as Mary Anne Hearn cannot seek out a role model if she cannot imagine her existence or even and create criteria for her, neither can Aurora offer herself as a model for literary success if she does not imagine and address her followers. In this sense, these two heroines imagine and empower one another, even if they never read each other's texts.

Yet because Hearn did rise up as the hero in her own success story and educate herself along the way, she does eventually read *Aurora Leigh*, and writes about it in her

biographical sketch of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Famous Women Authors*. Written for the general reader, the piece is a fawning celebration of Browning's life, but it does convey a point of criticism, a regret for the “disagreeable” passages in the poem:

The poem has many passages of beauty, but it has also some very disagreeable ones, and the conversations among the people in society as introduced by Mrs. Browning are the worst of all. They hurt us when we read, but we let them go in the joy and content of the final triumph. (Hope 123)

When Hearn says “it hurts us when we read,” she is presumably using the editorial “we” – but what if we take that “we” more literally and begin to imagine what it meant to read *Aurora Leigh* from the perspective of an evangelical, working-class woman writer in the latter half of the nineteenth century? It is, after all, a fine coincidence that this self-described “working woman” goes by the names “Mary Anne” and “Marianne,” both cognates of “Marian,” the name Barrett Browning assigns to the character representing everything noble about the working classes in *Aurora Leigh*.

Read from this perspective, Hearn anticipates twentieth-century quarrels with the poem's class consciousness. Hearn's expression here is ambiguous: it is unclear whether she is horrified by the grotesque portrait of the mob attending Marian's wedding or the malicious response of the privileged Lady Waldemar. But either way, her comment resonates with Cora Kaplan's oft-cited complaint that *Aurora Leigh* reveals a startling lack of sympathy for the poor: “only children (innocents) and prostitutes (exploited by men) escape with full sympathy” the rest are represented by a “lumpen motley of thieves, drunkards, rapists and child beaters, except for Marian, whose embourgeoisement in terms of language and understanding occurs at an embarrassing speed” (Kaplan 12). Re-reading *Aurora Leigh* in juxtaposition with

Hearn's autobiography allows us to consider this gross caricature of the poor from the perspective of the poorer, working-class reader.

It also allows us, more specifically, to read *Aurora Leigh* from the perspective of a working-class, female writer who already felt the distinction between her own writing and that of literary heroines, whether imagined or real. For despite her success in serving the modest ends of *The Christian World's* niche market, Hearn continues to feel pressure to expand her horizons as an author. Not only does she continue to wish that she could write a successful novel, she also notes that her friends “especially the older ones,” expressed “regret” that she wrote almost exclusively for one publisher. She says, “they think it a pity that I have not occasionally contributed to other journals and other magazines, and by this means been brought into touch with readers of perhaps a different class” (277).

Mary Anne Hearn must have heard these challenges and critiques echoed in book two of *Aurora Leigh*, where criticism of working-class writing is implied by Aurora's distinction between writing “for the booksellers” and writing “for her art.” Aurora notes how, when she was “poor” she was “constrained, for life / to work with one hand for the /booksellers / While working with the other for myself / And art” (3. 302-305). Aurora learns to use the editorial “we” and write encyclopedia entries, light stories for magazines and monthly papers to earn a living. She shows that writing is work, not merely emotional improvisation, but she sees this as a temporary phase in her evolution as a writer because it requires a prostitution of her talents rather than a vehicle for artistic expression. This distinction between writing for booksellers and writing for art carries with it a judgment against any writer who remains in this dormant phase,

writing with “both hands,” so to speak, for the bookseller, without progressing into a career as an artist. For Aurora, writing for the bookseller is, at best, a temptation to be resisted. She gives it only enough attention to fulfill her desire to experience it and then quickly distance herself from it; the working-class writer's limitations are set up as a contrast, a foil for Aurora's later success.

Even more indicative of Aurora's attitude toward the lower classes is her relationship with Marian Erle. In terms of the plot, Marian Erle is friend, rival, and muse to Aurora Leigh, but she is also an alter-ego, with a life story that is a lower-class, romanticized version of the narrative of the literary heroine. She too becomes an autobiographer when she tells her life story to Aurora Leigh, a life story that follows a similar path to Aurora's own life-journey. Like Aurora, Marian is orphaned. She loses her parents long before she runs away from home, saying, “Father, mother, home, / Were God and heaven reversed to her: The more / she knew of Right, the more she guessed their wrong.” (3. 936-938). She is alienated by her values as well as her temperament, a feeling Aurora relates to in her disagreements with her aunt. Aurora also shares Marian's lack of interest in the domestic arts and tendency toward Romantic reverie:

Her parents called her a strange, sickly child,  
 Not good for much, and given to sulk and stare,  
 And smile into the hedges and the clouds,  
 [...] Out-door jobs  
 Went ill with her, and household quiet work  
 She was not born to. (3. 121-127)

Thus Marian, like Aurora in her Aunt's home, is compelled to educate herself, though Marian's library is a tattered, hand-me-down version of the library Aurora inherits from her father:

[The pedlar] asked peradventure she could read.  
 And when she answered 'ay,' would toss down  
 Some stray odd volume from his heavy pack,  
 A Thompson's season's, mulcted of the Spring,  
 Or half a play of Shakespeare's torn across. (3. 971)

Both women are forced to refute Romney's assumptions about their vocation. Marian, for example first appears to have received the same “seal” as Romney, “to work with God at Love” (4. 138-139, 146), but in the end, this “seal” leads Marian to raise her illegitimate child alone.

As Aurora admits, Marian's narrative is a necessarily a second-hand autobiography. Aurora can only tell a version of Marian's story—fleshed out by imagination and hindsight:

We talked. She told me all her story out  
 Which I'll retell with fuller utterance,  
 As colored and confirmed in aftertimes  
 by others and herself too. (4. 827-830).

Aurora interrupts the story later to remind the reader that Marian's narrative has become part of her own, and that as poet she assigns significance to it in the act of retelling:

I tell her story and grow passionate.  
 She, Marian did not tell it so, but used  
 meek words that make no wonder of herself  
 for being so sad a creature. (3. 847-850)

And later in Book Four, she admits that she has blended her own perspective and intuition with Marian's narrative:

She told the tale with simple, rustic turns, –  
 strong leaps of meaning in her sudden eyes  
 That took the gaps of any imperfect phrase  
 of the unschooled speaker: I have rather writ  
 the thing I understood it so, than the thing  
 I heard it so. (4. 151-156).

Thus Aurora makes it clear that readers will learn less about Marian from her narrative than they will about Aurora's relationship to that narrative. Aurora interprets Marian's story as a version of her own story: as it resonates with her own experience, she allows it to transform her. Marian's confession is the vehicle by which Aurora is able to reconsider her relationship with Romney and her relationship to her writing. Both have failed because Aurora has lacked the love that “poor” Marian so freely bestows.

By extension, Aurora's relationship to Marian's narrative tells us something about her relationship to the working and lower classes as writers. She suggests that the life narrative of the lower or working class artists must be discovered and translated: discovered by a “poet of the age” like herself and translated into poetic language and epic conventions. In Aurora's version, Marian becomes an object rather than the subject of her own autobiography, for Aurora does not believe Marian even recognizes herself as the heroine in her own autobiography. Within this narrative gap between Marian Erle and Aurora Leigh, I imagine a challenge and an opportunity for some lower or working-class writer to fulfill it.

Mary Anne Hearn accepts this imagined invitation when she begins constructing an autobiographical narrator to bridge the gap between Aurora Leigh the autobiographer and Marian Erle the autobiographer. Hearn makes an especially good candidate for this project because her life experiences also bridge the gap between the

two extremes represented by the iconic Aurora Leigh and the larger-than-life Marian Erle. For example, Hearn recalls the summers of her childhood, in the hops-fields working alongside the coarse migrant workers who, like Marian's father, earned a living by “random jobs despised by steadier workmen—keeping swine, picking hops”(3. 860). Additionally, as a child Hearn thrived in Sunday School classes and later became one of the Sunday school teachers described in Marian Erle's story, ministering to girls who were as poor or poorer than Hearn herself had been as a young student. But by the time Hearn writes her autobiography, she has also traced Aurora's footsteps: as her career progresses, she finds herself on the periphery of the artists' community, conducting research in the British Museum reading rooms.

This spectrum of experience sets Hearn firmly between the two extremes, within the middle ground that Aurora Leigh fails to address. At the “eventide” of Hearn's life (as her final chapter is titled), the conversations she had with Cobbe and Ruskin are peripheral to her more common experience as a member of the working class. She has “risen up” like the little girl she longed to read about as a twelve year old, and she has effectively written the autobiography she once longed to read. But in doing so, she makes a conscious decision to illuminate rather than eclipse her working-class identity—a choice indicated by the title of her autobiography, *A Working Woman's Life*. She makes a career out of catering to working-class readers and thus finds herself both creating and filling the roles of working-class literary heroine and muse.

While Aurora's merging of the sacred and spiritual is characterized by anger, defiance and isolation, Hearn's neat separation of the sacred and secular gives her room to be extraordinarily patient and to remain in community with those who would

traditionally restrict her career. In fact, some of Hearn's most interesting (and puzzling) moves in her narrative involve her own decisions to restrict herself as a writer – or so it seems. Compare, for example, her response to Whittemore's criticism with Aurora's response to Romney Leigh. In *Aurora Leigh*, Romney voices all the ready obstructions to Aurora's career and personal growth: he tempts her to abandon her career as an artist, he demeans the value of women's art and tries to compel her to accept a more common definition of woman's duty by marrying him and supporting his philanthropic socialist projects. But as Aurora explains to her aunt, she was “born” to “walk another way than his” (2. 580). This “other way” is of course the way of the artist called by God to spread his glory, to keep “open roads, / betwixt the seen and unseen” a calling she believes has more potential for curing the ills of mankind than Romney's socialist programs (2. 468-469).

In many ways, Whittemore functions as a counterpart to Romney Leigh. He is Hearn's harshest male critic, bullying her with sarcastic criticism of her poetry. Though theirs is not a romantic relationship, there is a significant merger between the two as she contracts to write for him under a pen name that she takes from him much as a woman takes a man's name in marriage. Like Aurora, Hearn is challenged to prove the male figure wrong. She must do so in two ways: to show him that she can write poetry he admires, and to demonstrate that she can “do something” with her writing, even if she cannot “thrill everyone” with a novel. Like Aurora's relationship to Romney, Hearn's relationship with Whittemore forces her to define and refine the purposes of her art as well as her relationship to her readers. Like Aurora, Hearn stubbornly persists with her own agenda. Additionally, when Whittemore dies before Hearn takes on the role of

editor, the professional relationship comes to parallel the romantic in Aurora Leigh – when Hearn accepts the role of editor, she has the opportunity to recast Whittemore's vision just as Aurora does for Romney.

Though the structure outlined above suggests a strong parallel between the two male figures, the details suggest that Whittemore is a refreshing contrast to Romney Leigh. Unlike Romney, who dismisses Aurora's writing career as a frivolous indulgence, Whittemore's criticism challenges Hearn to more fully embrace her own potential as a writer. As a more sympathetic Romney figure, he believes that Hearn can and should write herself out of her circumstances. Whittemore actually urges her to follow the artist's narrative, to follow in the footsteps of the literary heroines of her day. He sees her potential, urges her to develop her writing skills and challenges her to use examples from secular literature as sources for her religious poetry. He encourages her to merge the sacred and secular genres and gives her every opportunity to make the transition from “poor village girl” to accomplished artist.

As part-time reverend and part time editor, Whittemore spends his weekend in Farningham shepherding the flock but spends his weekdays in London in the publishing district, creating a new periodical intended to encourage unity among different denominations. With his commute he links the small town of Farningham (and by extension, Mary Anne Hearn and her sheltered, evangelical world-view) to London and secular business endeavors. And it is through her work for him that she is forced to consider that line dividing sacred and secular. He encourages her to go to London, and thus embrace the potential for merging the sacred inspiration with the secular business of her writing – just as Aurora and many others chose to do.

But Hearn resists, choosing instead to mix her literary work with Sunday school teaching in her home village or other small towns. She resists Whittemore's encouragement to move to London for the same reason that she resists merging the sacred and secular narratives in her autobiography. She does not want to do (or allow Whittemore to do) to herself what Aurora Leigh has done to Marian Earle. She does not want her desire to “do something” and “thrill everyone” to efface the narrative of the working-class writer, or to obscure her commitment to evangelical, working-class values. Thus she stays in small towns like Farningham, and she maintains two separate plot lines in her story, allowing both her career and her spiritual journey to work themselves out within the boundaries of the working class, and thus to create a true working-class literary heroine.

Hearn continues this strategy right up to the very end of her autobiography. The final chapter “Eventide” wraps up various elements of her story in a somewhat awkward but surprisingly methodical way. She begins by reflecting on old age and her life's work in generic, religious terms:

These are the days when our great Task-Master is giving a gracious ingathering; and though our harvest is poorer than we hoped, yet it is very good to have our golden sheaves, however small and few they be, that we may lay them at His feet. For it has all been His doing. (272)

She follows with a more specific review of her growth as a writer, sketching herself as a young writer and then as she sees herself in her old age, very near the end of her life and career. She notes,

A pad, a pen and a shady nook used to be all I required for a good and happy day, but they are not all I want now. A firm table, a fountain pen, a good fire and an easy chair are more to be desired than the couches of moss in the shadiest nook. (273)

Here she rejects the romanticism of her youth, admits in her maturity a shift away from her reverence of the romantic authoress, and suggests that even a humble working-woman's life has bought her basic comforts and small luxuries. Additionally this statement implies that she has learned there is more than one way to draft the image of the literary heroine and she is offering –in the form of her autobiography – one version of that narrative.

She then responds to a working-class concern, the frequently asked question about whether or not the writing life is worthwhile, and whether or not it has been a lucrative career. She admits it is not a career to be entered by those who wish to make a lot of money, but it is worthwhile for those who have something to say; she notes that she herself did not ever emphasize earning money. The fact that she even entertains this question supports the claim of her title that she is at heart, a “working woman writer.”

As she claims in her last comment about money:

I have been paid and over-paid all my life. Always I have known that it was not in me to do any great thing which would impress the world, and cause me to be kept in remembrance, but have hoped that I should be able to do a great many little things which might tell on individuals. My desire has been to “serve my generation and fall asleep.” To meet the needs of the future there will always be sufficient journals and writers for them. (273)

She then lists the many books she has authored, noting a great number of small texts that will not be kept in remembrance except as historical curiosities.

She does not champion rigorous editorial policies, a drive to push writers to artistic frontiers or financial landslides, but instead humanizes her editors and praises them in simple working-class terms, citing their “kindness,” “fairness,” “cordiality,” and the “harmony” between them. Their good character is explanation enough for why she

did not “contribute to other journals and magazines, and by this means be brought into touch with readers of perhaps another class” (277). She further justifies her loyalty to Messrs Clark and company and to her working-class readers, with this final anecdote:

Who could help but being satisfied with a constituency as large as mine? Once I was talking to Mr. James Greville Clark of the enormous numbers of copies of a certain novel. “To be read by so many is enough to make one envious.” “Not you!” he said, and he told me the circulation of *The Christian World* that year. (278)

This final word about her writing career is significant, not only because it supports the fact that she did “tell on many individuals” but more importantly because it resonates with, repeats, and revises the conversation she records with Whittemore at the very beginning of her writing career. It is a direct response and a perfect bookend to the troubling challenge he issued to her early on that if she could write a book like *Jane Eyre* (i.e. write a popular novel) then she would really do something. With this final story, she is in effect proving that she did indeed “do something,” and she presents that to her reader as a revision of the stereotype of literary heroism, a revision made of and for the working-class reader.

But this statement is also significant in that after this story she breaks off and quite abruptly changes the subject to politics. She turns to a brief paragraph about her lack of enthusiasm about politics, as if to answer in a final way any questions about where she stands, or to quickly dismiss any inquiries into that realm. Then she changes subjects once again, just as abruptly, to announce that she will bring her autobiography to a close with a homily. She follows with a conventional, homily, testifying to her faith and exhorting her readers to remain. She preaches for a bit and then half apologizes for

it, saying “I find I am concluding with a homily, which I fear is quite characteristic, but then in one's autobiography one is allowed to tell one's own experience” (280).

This shift from a statement about her popularity as a writer, to a glib glossing over of politics and then to this final homily gives an unexpected force to the conclusion of Hearn's autobiography. She excuses her sermonizing by claiming that she can do what she wants to with her autobiography, and in the end, indeed she has. This bit of defiance is necessary to our understanding of her conclusion. Because she has defied working-class convention and literary convention in bringing these two modes of autobiography together, she makes no apology for this juxtaposition and makes no attempt to integrate the two smoothly; instead she allows them to resonate and conflict as they will, from the very beginning of her narrative to the very end -- and in this act, somewhere between these two narratives, she has constructed a space in which the working-class writer can, and must exist.

Hearn's final paragraph very subtly suggests why this working-class example is so important to her. She reflects on the words of an evening hymn, and remembers singing it with a group of young female students as the daylight faded. She chooses it because it is a “good evening hymn” to sing in the “twilight” of her life (281). But the words of this hymn are less striking than details she shares about why the fading daylight was an important element of the prayer meeting. She says,

In the old days when the weekly meetings of my Bible-class were held in my sister's house or my own, it was our custom, as the daylight slowly faded, to finish them in the twilight, or sometimes the firelight. If I wanted the girls to talk about the difficulties or the joys of young Christians, or of events in their own lives, they would be less timid without than with the light. And so some of our happiest and most sacred times have been when the room was full of faces of girls in shadow, and the Spirit of Peace seemed to brood over us. (280-281)

Ostensibly, her purpose here is to draw the comparison between the joy of those twilight confessions and her contentedness in the “eventide” of her life, but the image of a group of young girls finding a comfortable medium in which they can speak about the meaning of their lives effectively recreates her own autobiographical project. Her model, a juxtaposition of the conversion narrative and the artist's life, is an open invitation. She invites anyone “beginning life with little or no advantages” to tell the story of that life herself, and not simply let someone else, such as Aurora Leigh, appropriate that story for a minor character in the epic of her own success.

### Chapter Three: Maggie Tulliver and Frances Power Cobbe

In her formidable autobiography of 1894, Frances Power Cobbe identifies a turning point in her spiritual journey:

At last my efforts to believe in orthodox Christianity ceased altogether. In the summer after my twentieth birthday I had reached the end of a long struggle. The complete downfall of Evangelicalism, – which seems to have effected in George Eliot's strong mind in a single fortnight of intercourse with Mr. And Mrs. Bray, – had taken in my case four long years of miserable mental conflict and unspeakable pain. It left me with something as nearly like a *tabula rasa* faith as can well be imagined. (92)

In these few lines, Cobbe identifies a theme of her *Life*: the troubled but methodical response to changing beliefs, accompanied by rigorous self-scrutiny. By making reference to George Eliot at this critical point in her own spiritual history, she invites readers to juxtapose Eliot's de-conversion story with her own autobiography. I respond to this invitation by turning to Eliot's most autobiographical novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, to show that a comparison of narrators, particularly a comparison of the way the two narrators interpret their relationship to their subjects, can be instructive and can suggest ways that Frances Power Cobbe's *Life* serves as a revision of *The Mill on the Floss*.

Frances Power Cobbe was born into an Anglo-Irish, Evangelical Christian family in Dublin in 1822, the fifth child and first daughter of Charles and Frances Cobbe. As was typical for a daughter of the gentry during that time, Cobbe received an informal education at home and was sent briefly to a girls' finishing school during her teens. She was unhappy at school and supplemented her limited formal education with intense and

extensive private study primarily in religious texts. Her parents were relatively accommodating of her lack of interest in marriage or social activities and allowed her to stay at home instead of going to balls attended by others of her age and class. She served as manager of the household during her mother's invalidism and after her mother's death, all while beginning her lifelong career as an essayist and journalist. Her father, while tolerant of her reading and writing habits, was not tolerant of her de-conversion from Christianity nor her commitment to Theism, and he (briefly) banished her from his home upon learning that she no longer shared his belief in the divine inspiration of scripture. After his death, Cobbe traveled extensively through Europe, and then assisted for several years in a home for poor and delinquent children. She visited workhouses and used her journalism to draw attention to their deplorable conditions and advocate for their reform. She also wrote in favor of women's emancipation, drawing attention to the reality of domestic violence and the property laws that enabled it. In 1860 Cobbe met artist Mary Lloyd, who shared Cobbe's interest in animal rights. They lived together in London, and later in a village in Wales until Lloyd's death in 1898. Cobbe died at age eighty-one in 1904, ten years after the publication of her autobiography.

Before the autobiography was to be published, the press indicated that she would recount reminiscences of George Eliot, when in fact Cobbe only mentions Eliot three times in the text, once in the passage cited above, and once to acknowledge that Eliot was among the “more gifted Englishwomen of the Victorian Era” (578), and once more in passing. Though she admired Eliot's mind, Cobbe had strong reservations about Eliot's morals. She wrote privately to her publisher George Bently: “They all state that I record reminiscences of George Eliot. Now it happens that I never interchanged a word

with her—having (truth to tell) an old fashioned prejudice in favor of lawful matrimony” (qtd. in Mitchell 111). Even more offensive to Cobbe than Eliot's common law marriage was her choice of partner, for George Lewes was among Cobbe's opponents in her tireless antivivisection campaign. Presumably, this is the reason Cobbe refused an invitation to meet Eliot while they vacationed concurrently in Florence in 1860. In the same letter to Bently, Cobbe exclaims, “what infinite pity that her real genius allied itself in such base fashion!” (qtd. in Mitchell 111)

Eliot maintained a like discretion in both public and private references to Cobbe. In April of 1863, she publicly approved of “good Miss Cobbe's rejoinder” to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Address to the Women of England*, finding it free from “all tartness or conceit.” In a private letter to Sara Sophia Hennel, Eliot referred's preface to Parker's *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, it “very honorable[...]a little too metaphorical here and there, but with real thought and good feeling in it.” (qtd. in Mitchell 131) The two had mutual friends, including suffragist Mentia Taylor, and both, at different times attended Unitarian services in London at the Little Portland Street chapel, led by James Martineau (Mitchell 151). Both Eliot and Cobbe were among the “smart women” admired by Masson and Macmillian, publishers of *Macmillian's Magazine*; the April 1861 issue included Cobbe's “Workhouse Sketches” as well as Dinah Mulock's review of *The Mill on the Floss* (Mitchell 115).

While these two unorthodox women of the nineteenth century “never interchanged a word” with one another and never rubbed shoulders, their ideas and reputations did. The assumption that Cobbe would have much to say about Eliot in her autobiography was not altogether unreasonable, for they had much in common. They

both were outspoken women with unorthodox beliefs, both experienced and wrote about their de-conversion from Evangelical Christianity, and both maintained long-term, unconventional domestic partnerships – Eliot with the unmarried Lewes, and Cobbe with Mary Lloyd. Pairing Cobbe's *Life* with *The Mill on the Floss* reveals great differences in how they each perceived and responded to the de-conversion experience.

The point of comparison begins with the passage from Cobbe's autobiography cited above, where Cobbe criticizes Eliot's swift and permanent de-conversion from Evangelical Christianity. While she is critiquing Eliot, she is implicitly critiquing her younger self, for she writes from the perspective of a Theist, after having lost faith in Evangelicalism and then re-converting to many of her earlier beliefs but without the trappings of evangelical dogmas. Cobbe writes as both narrator and critic of her own former beliefs, functioning as a third-person omniscient narrator comparable to Eliot's narrator in *The Mill on the Floss*, who narrates and critiques the beliefs (and loss of beliefs) experienced by Maggie Tulliver.

Both narrators interpret their relationship to their subject in terms of nineteenth-century theories of evolutionary anthropology, namely the trope of primitive fetishism. As Sally Shuttleworth and Peter Logan have argued, *The Mill on the Floss* is deeply concerned with the unmasking of provincial fetishism – a task carried out by the narrator in her unmasking of Maggie's many fetishes. In a like manner, Cobbe repeatedly characterizes her young self as a fetishist throughout her chapter called “Religion.”

In *Victorian Fetishism*, Peter Logan traces ways that the pre-Freudian, nineteenth-century concept of fetishism broadly influenced and characterized Victorian

thought. Deeply informed by evolutionary anthropology, Victorians were intent on distinguishing between culture and “unculture.” Unculture was characterized by the primitive, and the primitive was strongly associated with fetishism. Fetishism was the earliest phase in Comte's analysis of the stages of belief, and was followed by polytheism and monotheism. These stages of belief applied to societies in general but also to individuals. Feuerbach expanded the idea of fetishism to include all forms of religion, including Christianity. Any form of belief in which humans ascribe human qualities or life to objects or ideas is an example of fetishism. According to Feuerbach, when Christians project human qualities onto their idea of God, they make that idea a fetish.

Logan's reading of Eliot's realism is a useful starting point for understanding the relationship between Cobbe and Eliot. He explains that Eliot used fictional realism to depict provincial culture in nineteenth-century England as characterized by fetishism, but he points out that Eliot's claim to realism in her novels is also a form of fetishism. By extension, I read both *The Mill on the Floss* and Cobbe's *Life* through the rubric of fetishism, arguing that the narrators of both texts are aware of the way narratives can function as fetishes, and that their own narratives help them discern which beliefs they must discard and which beliefs they cannot live without.

Both Eliot and Cobbe draw on the assumption that the stages of individual development correspond with the stages of cultural development. It was not uncommon for children to be included in the Victorian category of the primitive; the assumption was that as children matured in advanced societies, they would advance beyond this primitive belief. Eliot and Cobbe characterize the younger Maggie and the younger Cobbe as prone to superstitious fetishism. However, as they draw on this belief about

children to establish the relationship between the narrator and subject, they must also contend with the companion belief that women were more likely than men to be subject to such superstitious beliefs. David Hume promoted this idea in *The Natural History of Religion* (1777), and the idea held over through the nineteenth century; Hume asks, “What age or period of life is the most addicted to superstition? The weakest and most timid. What sex? The same answer must be given” (qtd. in Logan 27). Victorian separate spheres ideology made weak attempts to correct this view of women by making the feminine realm of the hearth the spiritual center of the home. But in the process, Victorians tended to fetishize women and female spirituality. Thus women were not only believed to be subject to fetishistic beliefs, but were also fetishized by their own culture.

Both Cobbe and Eliot engage both of these stereotypes by establishing young Cobbe and young Maggie as subject to fetishistic beliefs, and by making them increasingly capable, as they mature, of wrestling these belief patterns and of resisting attempts by others to make them into fetishes. In both these narratives, the conversion narrative includes a turn toward critiquing fetishism and a growing awareness of how even non-primitive belief systems continue to operate in fetishistic patterns. They also demonstrate how an awareness of such fetishistic patterns does not negate one's ability to believe.

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*The Mill on the Floss* contains what may be the most famous fetish scene in all of nineteenth-century fiction. After becoming frustrated because she was not allowed to go with her father to fetch Tom home from school, young Maggie Tulliver is seen “alternately grinding and beating” the head of a large wooden doll against the rough

brick wall of the chimneys in the attic (26). The doll's features are “entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering.” This passage is a good example how the reader “sees in two dimensions,” as Gordon Haight expresses it, with the narrator's mature point of view putting the child's point of view into perspective (vii). In this case, the more mature narrator is detached from Maggie's all-encompassing violent mood swings; Maggie is at one moment bitterly disappointed and sulking angrily in the dark attic, and in the next minute dashing cheerfully into the sunshine to play in the ethereal cloud of flour in the mill. But this narrative voice is not simply more mature but also paternalistic, according to Peter Logan in *Victorian Fetishism*. Logan observes, “the narrator's language suggests an indulgent humor in the representation of Maggie: to be 'soothed' by the violent actions of 'grinding and beating' is an image of primordial catharsis, one well suited to expressing the irrational passions of a child-fetishist” (77). In characterizing Maggie's behavior as both childish and primitive, the narrator's paternalism resembles “the kind of paternalism characteristic in other contexts as that of the colonizer for the colonized [or] the advanced society for the undeveloped” (Logan 77). Thus, in the context of nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology, the narrator represents one evolutionary state and Maggie another.

It is accepted practice to read the narrator in *The Mill on the Floss* as George Eliot and Maggie Tulliver as a version of young Mary Ann Evans; yet at the same time, the narrator is cast as an entity completely different than Maggie Tulliver. She is distinguished not only by point of view but also by socio-economic status, time, place, and (most obviously) by the fact that Maggie's death is set in the past, long before she would reach the narrator's maturity. I read Eliot's use of a third-person omniscient

narrator as a part of the autobiographical project of managing two selves: the present self as autobiographer and the past self as autobiographical subject.

Frances Power Cobbe establishes a similar relationship between herself and her younger subject. While clearly following autobiographical convention and making her subject a younger version of the narrator still she serves as a critic to her own younger self, and like Maggie's narrator, writes from a different time, place, and point of view. Thus when Cobbe tells a story from her early childhood, she can critique it with the same objectivity with which Eliot's narrator critiques Maggie Tulliver. In an incident parallel to Maggie's attic scene, Cobbe tells a story from her early childhood which she calls a “droll example of the way in which fetiches [sic] are created among child-minded savages.” Cobbe remembers this story with “great amusement”:

One day (as my mother long afterward explained to me), I had been hungrily eating a piece of bread and butter out of doors when one of the greyhounds, of which my father kept several couples, bounded past me and snatched the bread and butter from my little hands. The outcry which I was preparing to raise on my loss was suddenly stopped by a bystander's judiciously awakening my sympathy in Peter's enjoyment, and I was led up to stroke the big dog and make friends with him. Seeing how successful was this diversion, my nurse thenceforth adopted the practice of seizing everything in the way of food, knives, etc. which it was undesirable I should handle and also of shutting objectionable open doors and windows, exclaiming “Oh! Peter! Peter has got it! Peter has shut it!” - as the case may be. (33)

In this case a live being functions as a fetish because it is described with human emotions as well as the power to suddenly confiscate objects and create obstacles. Cobbe carefully assigns agency in retelling this incident: it is the adults responsible for her who assume that because she is a child, she is susceptible to fetishism. The nurse projects her own will onto the fetish and gives it precedence over the will of the child. Prompted by

this charade, the “child-minded savage” accepts the adult-authored fetish, which takes on a life of its own in Cobbe’s youthful imagination:

Accustomed to succumb to this unseen Fate under the name of Peter, and soon forgetting about the dog, I came to think there was an all-powerful, invisible Being constantly behind the scenes, and had so far pictured him as distinct from the real original Peter that one occasion when I was taken to visit at some house where there was an odd looking end of a beam jutting out under the ceiling, I asked in awestruck tones: “Mama! Is that Peter's head?” (33)

Thus “Peter” becomes an example of a fetishized idea: the magical power ascribed to a dog is transferred in Cobbe's mind to a general omnipresent being that can materialize unexpectedly, animating inanimate objects. Cobbe works to minimize the story by referring to it as a “droll example” and never mentions it again.

It is worth noting that both Maggie and the young Cobbe are drawn into these fetishistic practices through a combination of an outside authority and their own natural desire for an enchanted experience. For Cobbe, the idea of Peter is suggested by her nurse and her parents, yet it takes on a life of its own in her youthful imagination. For Maggie, the idea of a fetish comes from scripture: it was a “luxury of vengeance suggested to her by the picture of Jael destroying Sisera in the old Bible” with a tent peg (26). While Eliot seems to celebrate this spirit in Maggie Tulliver, Cobbe remains more detached, attempting to manage the tension between the natural desire for a spiritual experience and a reason-based preference for the empirical.

In Cobbe's *Life*, “Peter” suggests an important metaphor for the way fetishes can be created by others. As she evolves spiritually and emerges from the state of the “child-minded savage,” she rigorously seeks the origin of beliefs that have effectively become fetishes. While this incident is the only one in which she uses the term “fetish” to

describe her belief system, it corresponds to the fetishistic qualities of Evangelical doctrines discussed later in her autobiography.

There are many implied parallels between the way she received the Evangelical teachings in her home and the way she received the idea of the mythical “Peter.” For one, Christianity is presented to Cobbe by the adults in her life as a narrative with the power to direct her behavior, just as in the case of Peter. But in the same way that Cobbe allows the narrative of Peter to take on additional significance in her imagination, she takes her evangelical belief more seriously and expands its significance beyond what she observes in others. When she reflects upon her early religious sensibility, for example, she recognizes an incongruity between her family's faith practices and her own:

I can even remember being dimly conscious that my good father and mother performed their religious exercises more as a duty – whereas to me such things, as far as I could understand them, were real pleasures; like being taken to see somebody I loved. I have since recognized that my parents were, in Evangelical terms “under the law”, while in my childish heart the germ of the mysterious New Life was already planted. (73)

Cobbe likens her “religious duties” to “being taken to see somebody I loved.” As in the case of Peter, whose arbitrary rules are created by adults to teach her discipline, these religious duties and the narratives that accompany them also take on the qualities of a mysterious being. This great love for her religious duties, and her devotion to the person of God associated with them, makes her de-conversion a devastating loss.

The simple, pre-Freudian use of the term “fetish” during this period referred to the worship of a non-living thing believed to be alive. The incidents of childhood fetishism in *The Mill on the Floss* and Cobbe's *Life* show how the definition had already broadened to refer to an object of abuse, or alternatively, a living thing credited with

more significance or power than it actually possessed. As this study of both texts as conversion narratives will demonstrate, a narrative may also be treated as a fetish.

Regardless of what or who is treated as a fetish, the relationship between that fetish and the fetishist does not actually exist until it is identified as such by a third party, known as the “fetish critic.” It is the fetish critic who decides that the fetishist has ascribed more significance or value to an object than it actually possesses. Together, the fetish, the fetishist, and fetish critic make up the points of what Peter Logan describes as the Fetish triangle. In the case of young Maggie Tulliver, Maggie is the fetishist, her old doll is the fetish, and the narrator, by identifying the falsity of Maggie’s beliefs about her doll, functions as fetish critic. In the case of Cobbe’s fetish “Peter,” the origins of the fetish complicate attempts to assign roles in the fetish triangle, because the nurse and parents simultaneously create the fetish and serve as fetish critic: they are fully aware of the falsity of the belief but have no intention of revealing the truth and converting the fetishist (Cobbe) to another set of beliefs. Additionally, Cobbe functions simultaneously as fetishist and fetish critic: as narrator she describes the false beliefs of her own very early youth.

In both *The Mill on the Floss* and *Cobbe’s Life*, the narrator also invites the reader to play the role of fetish critic, but the role of the fetish critic is a precarious one, itself always subject to the critique of an outsider. As Logan explains, the problem with naming a fetish, of course, is that “in asserting the falsity of the fetishist’s values, the critic simultaneously asserts the truth of his or her own system of values” (9). The fetish critic becomes “vulnerable to the claim of fetishism by another outsider” (Logan 9). The reader may share the narrator’s view, as intended, but the reader may also critique the

narrator's belief. Notably, Cobbe anticipates this in a general way in the preface to her *Life*. She acknowledges that her beliefs are tied to her own time and place: it is "a real *Life*, which he who reads it may take as representing fairly the joys, sorrows, and interests, the powers and limitations, of one of my sex and class in the era which is now drawing to a close" (xxix).

The vulnerability of the fetish critic to outside criticism is also addressed at various stages of the subjects' development, particularly as they attempt to differentiate between their parents' beliefs and their own. In many ways this tension is the theme of *The Mill on the Floss*, and serves Cobbe's *Life* as well. As each heroine tears down one belief system after another, she discovers that it is impossible to fully escape the influence of her past. Both Maggie, and young Cobbe are among the youth who "in the onward tendency of human things have risen among the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts" (Mill 239). Even after her rejection of Christianity, Cobbe admits, "Of course, there was Christian sentiment and the results of Christian training in all that I felt and did. I could no more have cast them off than I could have leaped off my shadow" (93).

Another fetish scene in *The Mill on the Floss* helps illustrate the tension between generations and the way that multiple fetish triangles can compete with one another. Logan draws attention to a scene in which Maggie serves as fetish critic soon after her father's trouble begins. She becomes upset by her mother's and Tom's overvaluing of the family linens, which strikes her as particularly wrong in the context of her father's rapidly failing health, so she angrily implies that her mother has created a fetish out of these linens. In this scene, Maggie privileges her own belief in her father's value over her

mother's belief in the linens' value. She violently asserts, "Mother, how can you talk so? As if you cared only for things with *your* on them, and not for what has my father's name too – to care about anything but dear father himself!--when he's lying there and may never speak to us again." (181). Again, this incident shows the instability of the fetishistic pattern: material objects may be either worshiped or abused, and living things may be treated as objects. They are "opposite manifestations of the same fetishistic pattern" (Logan 76).

Even in claiming that her father's value is greater than that of the family linens, Maggie becomes "vulnerable to the claim of fetishism by another outsider" (9), and in *The Mill on the Floss*, the narrator is always nearby to suggest such critiques, however subtly. Just as the narrator earlier identified Maggie's doll as a fetish, here she once again observes the intensity of Maggie's emotions with compassionate distance, noting that Maggie's "loving remembrance" of her father's tenderness is a "force within her" in fact, "that would enable her to do or bear anything for his sake" (181). As her father is on the cusp of life, only her "loving remembrance" of him will remain. As the cliché "keep a memory alive" suggests, an idea, such as a memory, may be as subject to fetishism as any material object.

While Maggie critiques her mother's over-valuing of material goods, she has a harder time extricating herself from other family fetishes, and for much of her early history she has a tendency to abuse the same fetishes that her family has set up for worship. This pattern plays out dramatically in her reaction to her cousin Lucy. Her mother and aunts make the difference between untamed Maggie and doll-like Lucy a point of obsession – witness their running commentary contrasting Maggie's wild and

unruly hair to Lucy's, which (like Lucy) is light and easily managed. Maggie shows her contempt for this fixation by sabotaging any attempts by others to tame her hair, dunking it under water (“in the vindictive determination that there should be no chance of curls that day”) and cutting it off altogether. Not long after cutting her hair, Maggie turns her abuse directly to the object of worship, Lucy herself. She repeats the earlier attic scene when she pushes poor “little pink-and-white Lucy into the cow-trodden mud” (91). The narrator sets Maggie up as both fetishist and fetish critic, unmasking the series of narratives that serve as fetishes in Maggie's spiritual development, as well as Maggie's attempts to critique them, a process I will continue to trace in this chapter.

It is easy to see Cobbe casting herself in similar situations in her life story. Like Maggie she finds herself distanced from her family when she comes to doubt the validity of claims that are central to her family's identity, and like the narrator in *The Mill on the Floss*, she can also critique the way her young self managed those doubts. She makes note of the first time she began to doubt the Bible: she was sitting with the family and servants around a fireplace in the dining room as her father read the Sunday evening sermon. She began to “cheerfully” ponder how the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes happened, “imagining that [she] was doing the right thing to try to understand it all.” She began to ask a series of questions:

‘Well! First there were the fishes and the loaves. But what was done to them? Did the fish grow and grow as they were eaten and broken? And the bread the same? No! that is nonsense. And then the twelve basketsful taken up at the end, when there was not nearly so much at the beginning. It is not possible!’ ‘O Heavens!’ (was the next thought) ‘ I am doubting the Bible! God forgive me! I must never think of it again’ (87).

Of course she does think of it again, and returning to such questions during her adolescence leads to the “downfall of Evangelicalism” in her mind. In this early scene she accidentally slips into the role of fetish critic as her elementary empiricism leads her to doubt the miraculous, and she unintentionally begins to question literal readings of scripture, which Logan cites as “the most familiar example of a fetishized textual representation,” for scripture is “a form of writing that because it has a metonymic proximity to the supernatural, acquires some of the value attributed to it, as though a god or spirit inhabits the writing” (Logan 12).

In setting the scene for this critical moment, Cobbe recalls her exact position in the room: “I was opposite the beautiful classic black marble mantelpiece, surmounted with an antique head of Jupiter Serapis (all photographed in my brain even now), and listening with all my might, as in duty bound” (87). The reference to the head of Jupiter Serapis is presumably included to demonstrate that the scene is “all photographed on [her] brain” but it also provides an important point of reference in setting up a series of fetish critics. The head of Jupiter Serapis represents a pre-Christian example of fetishism, in which human characteristics were projected upon the figures of Greco-Roman mythology. Cobbe’s father represents a fetish critic, unmasking the falsity of pagan mythology by asserting the primacy of the Christian God incarnate. And the child and future Theist serves as critic, albeit a reluctant and confused critic, of her father’s faith.

Another important example of competing fetish triangles in Cobbe’s *Life* is the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, when she refers to Eliot’s de-conversion from Evangelical Christianity. She suggests that they experienced something similar, but

in dramatically different ways. The young Cobbe has lost faith in Christianity and finds herself in an agnostic state. She also finds that this new perspective has brought her misery rather than liberation. Such devastation sends her on a quest for new narratives to live by. The mature Cobbe reflects on this phase from the perspective of a Theist who has, since the time in question, also unmasked the potential fetishes of agnosticism. Writing as a Theist critiquing her own agnosticism, she also critiques that of Eliot. She positions herself as critic, suggesting the superficiality of Eliot's stance. But Cobbe is also keenly aware of her own vulnerability as critic. At the end of the chapter, she is able to simultaneously defend Theism and recognize its limitations. She shows herself well aware that her Theism is subject to critique and even implies that she herself could level such critiques:

I know that no form of religious creed could have helped me any more than my own or as much as it has done to bear the brunt of such trial; and I remain to the present unshaken both in respect to the denials and the affirmations of Theism. There are great difficulties, soul-torturing difficulties besetting it; but the same or worse beset every other form of faith in God; and infinitely more, and to my mind, insurmountable ones, beset Atheism. For fifty years, Theism has been my staff of life. I must soon try how it will support me down the last few steps of my earthly way. I believe it will do so well. (106)

In this passage, Cobbe is able to speak with great confidence about her faith in Theism, despite its “soul-torturing difficulties.” Her own conversion story has taught her both the power and vulnerability of the fetish critic, both deemed preferable to the position of fetish or naive primitive fetishist – positions that Victorian Culture would tend to limit women to. This awareness, instead of causing her to descend into cynicism, nihilism or amoral behavior, empowers her to choose the faith that suits her best and to live by it with confidence.

Another aspect of fetishism in these two texts includes the authors' claims to realism. In the case of *The Mill on the Floss*, Logan explains, Eliot uses the novel to expose the social consequences of ascribing life to things and ideas that do not have life, yet the realist novel depends upon the reader's willingness to believe that what they read is real (87). In this case, it is not the book as object that becomes a fetish but the images created by the text. Summarizing the paradox of writing about fetishism, Logan explains: "In the novel's content, it operates as an antidote to fetishism, while in its formal technique it exploits fetishism in the service of the realistic mimetic effect" (87). He is not trying to devalue realism nor to discredit Eliot's art in the least, but rather to lead us to marvel at "remarkable self-awareness [Eliot] brings to the problem of ambivalence in writing about fetishism – her acknowledgment that fetishism is both a problem, as a social presence, and a power, as an aesthetic device" (Logan 87).

This tension is also at work in any autobiography, whenever the author presents the narrative of the self as real. Any spiritual autobiography that employs the conversion narrative is already subject to fetishism, for the conversion narrative (whether preserved in oral or written form) exists as a pattern of experience with the power to change a person's life, and more importantly, the after-life. Even in setting forth a revised version of that conversion narrative, and in serving as a new female role model for her readers, Cobbe risks creating new fetishes. Despite all the ways in which the act of autobiography may slide into fetishism, Cobbe's *Life*, like *The Mill on the Floss*, simultaneously exploits and critiques the patterns of fetishism. In doing so, both texts work to divert the fetish-gaze away from the fetish itself and toward the (female) fetish critic.

To signal that they are aware of the power and the problems of fetishism as an aesthetic device, both Cobbe and Eliot foreground the relationship between their subjects and the narratives they encounter through reading. Being well-read in general makes their subjects both better critics of the fetishes created by others, though they both wrestle with the temptation to make the narratives they discover through reading into fetishes.

Maggie often attempts to draw herself, as well as her friends and family, out of the “oppressive narrowness” of their provincial practices by sharing what she has learned from books. In those rare instances when her family pays close attention to her because of what she knows and values (rather than how she does or does not measure up to Lucy), she makes the most the opportunity. However, her family in general and her father in particular are confused about how to value Maggie's intelligence and what she has learned from books. Her father may boast that she can read “almost as well as the parson” yet is bothered that such intelligence is wasted on a daughter. He is also spooked by her vivid descriptions of the Devil, which she learned from reading such disparate sources as *The Devil's Dictionary* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. From his perspective, these books are merely decorations, part of a collection he bought because “they was all bound alike.” Thus he is surprised that such nice-looking books could contain such dark imagery and could have such a hold over his daughter. To him, the books are material objects, status symbols and a mark of moral integrity (which he assumes because one of the authors shares his first name), yet in Maggie's hands, the same books have taken on a value that he himself cannot derive from them – thus he implicitly marks them as her fetish. His discovery that these seemingly innocent books

have given Maggie such a clear picture of the Devil only adds to the family's sense that Maggie is the most primitive of them all, more akin to the gypsies than the respectable Dodsons.

Tom and Luke (the head Miller) are less disturbed by but rather more dismissive of Maggie's book knowledge; they simply refuse to accept any insight that does not derive from their own experience. Tom critiques her belief in what she reads by rudely devaluing it by calling her book-knowledge “stuff,” and Luke refuses to be enticed by Maggie's urging that he read about people of other lands. She says, “they are our fellow creatures, Luke – we ought to know our fellow creatures.” But Luke is turned off by her mention of Dutchmen, against whom he has adopted a special prejudice and says, “They're fools enoo – an rougues enoo – wi'out lookin' in books for 'em.” Maggie's book knowledge is again implicitly critiqued as a superfluous source of truth. Luke and Tom would both prefer to rely on their rustic empiricism than turn to narratives they have not experienced first hand.

Cobbe's recollections suggest that her family responded to her reading habits in a similar manner. Her mother, for example, “looked with a little wonder, blended with her tenderness at my violent outbursts of penitence, and at my strange fancy for reading the most serious books in my play hours” (84). Those serious books included the Bible and *The Whole Duty of Man* (a devotional text that Cobbe says was a “foretaste” of her “life-long interest in the subject of ethics”). Cobbe observes that she was a very religious child and “*devout* – what was normal at [her] age” (86). She says, “My brothers had not exhibited any such symptoms, but then they were healthy schoolboys, always engaged eagerly in their natural sports and pursuits; while I was a lonely, dreaming girl” (84).

The tongue-in-cheek reference to her bookishness as a “symptom” suggests that such attention to religious texts was potentially debilitating.

While these families may have difficulty valuing a daughter's desire to read, they both own books that hold a special significance for them. In both texts the fathers make inscriptions in books in order to borrow from their special power and to charge them with additional meaning, making both the physical book and the narratives within them into fetishes.

As in most nineteenth-century Evangelical homes, *Pilgrim's Progress* was a staple of religious and moral instruction in the Cobbe household. Cobbe remembers overhearing her father read it to her brothers while she was supposed to be completing her arithmetic lessons; she became so entranced with the story, illustrating the scenes on her slate, that her father noticed and invited her to join them. Her interest was so much greater than that of her brothers that he gave her his copy of the text, which had belonged to his grandmother, and which Cobbe treasured for the rest of her life, long after she had broken from his religious tradition. She records his inscription:

This book which belonged to my grandmother was given as a present to my dear daughter Fanny upon witnessing her delight in reading it. May she keep the Celestial City steadfastly in view; may she surmount the dangers and trials she must meet with on the road; and finally, be reunited with those she loved on earth in singing praises for ever and ever to Him who loved them and gave himself for them, is the fervent prayer of her affectionate father, Charles Cobbe. (85)

In contrast to Mr. Tulliver, Mr. Cobbe actually supports a fetishistic reverence for the narrative of *Pilgrim's Progress*, not simply the physical book itself. His inscription suggests that possession of the book implicates the owner in certain Evangelical doctrines, most importantly, “getting to heaven,” which Cobbe felt was “the prominent

feature” in her father's religion. In this way, *Pilgrim's Progress* functions as demi-scripture, which like scripture can invoke a “similar haunting” by “a god or spirit in it” (Logan 12).

Mr. Tulliver makes a mockery of the Evangelical practice of dedicating a text to the next generation when he forces Tom to write a curse against the Wakems in the family Bible. Mr. Tulliver's impulse in having this written down in the family Bible is characterized as a primitive one. The narrator reminds us that because such people can go to church and continue to hold pagan ideas, “we need hardly feel any surprise at the fact that Mr. Tulliver, though a regular churchgoer recorded his vindictiveness of the fly-leaf of a Bible.” Mr. Tulliver does not mean to desecrate the power of the Holy Scripture, but to appropriate its “proximity to the supernatural,” even if he does not fully live by its doctrines. The promise inscribed in the flyleaf of the Bible borrows from the supernatural power that is associated with the narrative within it.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, these two inscriptions remain remarkably powerful in both texts. Cobbe, despite her de-conversion, remains more subject to this narrative of “getting to heaven” than to any other: at the outset of her de-conversion, she denounces the idea of heaven and hell as a false belief, but later reclaims the doctrine of immortality when she makes the transition from Deist to Theist. Likewise, Maggie remains more bound to the narrative implied by her father's inscription than to any other narrative she encounters, for it is her loyalty to Tom and his loyalty to his father's oath that take precedence over

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<sup>10</sup> John Kucich cites this use of the Bible by the Tullivers as an example of how they rely on objects to communicate: “sentiments are considered trustworthy insofar as they become part of the book, through writing in it or swearing upon it” (326).

any other narrative she might seek for herself, especially the prospect of a relationship with Philip Wakem.

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Before Cobbe and Maggie return to the powerful narratives they cherished in their childhoods, they each experience a series of de-conversions. Maggie, for example, loses faith in the very same stories that had once given her hope of escape from the “oppressive narrowness” at St. Ogg's. This loss is illustrated in two scenes: her disillusioning encounter with the gypsies, and the sale of the family library. Her conversations with the gypsies lead her to doubt her own faith in Romantic narratives and show her tendency to over-value her limited education. After pushing Lucy in the mud, Maggie attempts to escape punishment by running away to live with the gypsies. She hopes to become their queen in much the same way that Lucy is the queen of the Dodsons, instead of being admired for beauty, she will be revered for her wisdom. She plans to educate the gypsies, sharing with them everything she has learned in books, and in turn, they will listen to her and love her. She believes “everything would be quite charming when she had taught the gypsies to use a washing-basin, and to feel an interest in books” (97), and she promises the old woman gypsy that she will share “everything there is in my books, I've read them so many times – and it will amuse you” (98). This colonization fantasy mirrors her longing to be accepted by her family, and is likewise doomed to failure, for the gypsies turn out to be exactly like the Dodsons' in their obsession with material goods, though on a humbler scale. While she quickly develops some vague sense that they might murder or molest her, it becomes clear to the reader that their worst instinct is to evaluate her in terms of market value. They empty

her pockets and determine that the prospect of earning a half-crown for her safe return is worth more than the trouble of keeping her.

Not until Maggie's encounter with the gypsies does the narrator reveal how limited Maggie's knowledge actually is. Not only are the gypsies unimpressed by what she knows, but the reality of their circumstances contradicts any romanticized notions she once entertained about their unencumbered lifestyle. The narrator explains this failure by making note of Maggie's limited education: "she had only been to school a year at St. Ogg's and had so few books that she sometimes read the dictionary, so that traveling over her small mind you would have found the most unexpected ignorance as well as unexpected knowledge" (100). If the gypsies and Dodsons have fetishized material possessions, Maggie critiques that fetish by attempting to replace it with another (her book-knowledge), which the narrator subsequently unmasks by showing exactly how unreliable that knowledge is.

Her loss of faith in books is represented by a loss of the books themselves, for they, like Mrs. Tulliver's "household gods," must be sold after Mr. Tulliver's bankruptcy. The books that Maggie once put so much faith in are ushered out of the house at the same time she is ushered into a world of adult responsibilities. In her sadder moments she still turns to her memories of what she has read for solace, but it no longer has the power it once did: "if she could have had all of Scott's novels and all Byron's poems! – then, perhaps, she might have found happiness enough to dull her sensibility to her daily life" (250). And she even finds in them a surrogate father figure, when she believes that "she would go to some great man – Walter Scott, perhaps – and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and would surely do something for her." However, her

fantasies are always interrupted by harsh reality of her present circumstances: “she could make dream-worlds of her own – but no dream-world would satisfy her now” (251).

The conversion narrative as presented to Cobbe by her father with its end goal of “getting to heaven,” was a template by which she lived her early life. It is present in all of the spiritual milestones of her youth, as when she punished herself for breaking any number of the severe rules she had made for herself, when she felt “rapturous joy” upon sensing a true sense of pardon for her sins, and when, at the age of seventeen, she “went through what Evangelical Christians call 'conversion'”(88). She responded to inevitable stirrings of doubt as tests to her faith, and she repeatedly returned from skepticism “in a passion of repentance and prayer to Christ to take my life or my reason than allow me to stray from his fold” (89). Even after her de-conversion, she uses the imagery of *Pilgrim's Progress*, as when she writes that “there were many, many hard moral fights with various Apollyons all along the road.”

Though Cobbe does not have an experience like Maggie's encounter with the gypsies to dramatize her loss of faith in the narratives of her youth, new narratives critique and replace old ones throughout her spiritual journey, unmasking the sacred texts she once treasured:

As time went on and my reading supplied me with a little more knowledge and my doubts deepened and accumulated, the returns to Christian faith grew fewer and shorter and as I had no idea of the possibility of reaching any other vital religion, I saw all that had made to me the supreme joy and glory of life fade out of it, while that motive which had been presented to me as the mainspring of duty and curb of passion, namely, the Hope of Heaven, vanished as a dream. (90)

She grieves her loss of faith, and recalls weeping for it: she says “I could scarcely in those days read even such poor stuff as the song of the Peri in Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (not to speak of Bunyan's vision of the celestial city) without tears rushing to my eyes” (90). Though she still has access to the books themselves, the narratives within them have been unmasked by new, competing narratives, specifically, Gibbon's chapters XV and XVI and "other books" she had read enough to "teach me that everything in historical Christianity had been questioned" (89).

At this point, both Maggie and the young Cobbe find themselves in a very awkward and lonely position. They have unmasked the fetishes of their youth and the fetishes of their community, yet they have not formed new belief systems. As they attempt to rebuild their belief system, they both turn to a form of renunciation, which as the narrators make clear has the potential to serve as a fetish itself.

Maggie is introduced to the idea of self-renunciation through Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. She finds the book in the stack that Bob Jakin brings to her as a replacement for the books she lost in the family sale. The idea of renunciation strikes her as a new solution to an old problem in her life:

all of the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure, as if that were the central necessity of the universe; and for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires – of taking her stand out of herself and looking at her own life as insignificant part of a divinely guided whole" (254)

Maggie's version of renunciation requires that she give up reading and romantic fantasies, including hope of a life beyond the "oppressive narrowness" of St. Ogg's shallow materialism. Additionally, she must renounce any desire or temptation to critique others or attempt to convert them to her own ideas. As a very practical example,

this means she will no longer resist her mother's attempt to tame her hair. She turns her mirror to the wall and does simple, practical handwork (instead of decorative needlework) as a physical manifestation of her renunciation of self.

The narrator presents Maggie's initial interpretation of renunciation as incomplete and immature: "She had not perceived – how could she until she had lived longer? – the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings, that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow bourne willingly." It is not until she becomes reacquainted with Philip Wakem that she begins to feel the sorrows of this new system, and she tells him, "I may not keep anything I used to love when I was little. The old books went; and Tom is different – and my father. It is like death. I must part with everything I cared for when I was a child. I must part with you: we must never take any notice of each other again" (263). But he points out that her belief in self-renunciation is false to his idea of the kind of woman Maggie is meant to be: "It makes me wretched to see you benumbing and cramping your nature in this way. You were so full of life when you were a child: I thought you would be a brilliant woman – all wit and imagination. And it flashes out in your face still, until you draw that veil of dull quiescence over it." He finally persuades her, but as she becomes less ascetic, she finds herself the subject of three conflicting narratives: Philip not only wants her to be the brilliant woman he once predicted she would become, but he also wants her to love him; Tom insists that she avoid Philip because their secret meetings in the Red Deeps threaten the family respectability and the hard work he has done to pay his father's debts, and finally, Stephen wants her, as a woman of great beauty, to give him her undivided attention and to desire him as well, to the point that having her look at him becomes an obsession: "he thought it was

becoming a sort of monomania with him, to want that long look from Maggie" (354-355). As Maggie senses the tension that will come from these three narratives attempting to claim her, she longs to return to renunciation. This time it is less an attempt to find happiness, and more an attempt to avoid pain, by escaping "as men do" in a "world outside" of loving (361).

Likewise, Cobbe goes back and forth between renouncing and re-claiming the fantasies of her youth, including the belief in Heaven. But she seems to go about it a much more intentional and methodical way than Maggie, who happens upon the ideas of Thomas à Kempis and then happens upon Philip Wakem in the Red Deeps just as serendipitously. Unlike Maggie, Cobbe's renunciation is rooted not in Christian practice, but rather in her own growing skepticism. While Maggie gives up her fantasies and longings in an attempt to find peace, Cobbe is motivated by her search for truth, and giving up the fantasies she cherished in her youth is a very difficult and emotional process. She explains,

On the one hand I had the choice to accept a whole mass of dogmas against which my reason and conscience rebelled; on the other, to abandon those dogmas and strive no more to believe the incredible, or to revere what I instinctively condemned; and then, as a necessary sequel, to cast aside the laws of duty which I had hitherto cherished; to cease to pray or take the sacrament and to relinquish the hope of a life beyond the grave. (91)

As this passage indicates, one of the greatest difficulties in Cobbe's de-conversion experience is her sense that she must choose either belief or unbelief, and that she perceives the difference between the two to be as stark as black and white. She is, at this point, unequipped to navigate a more nuanced belief system and has a hard time identifying what she is later able to describe as the "gray areas." As narrator of her story,

she looks back on this phase of belief and identifies it as one in which she was "literally creedless" with "very nearly a *tabula rasa*" of faith (92).

As Cobbe's experience suggests, the "tabula rasa" is an unsustainable myth, as well as an undesirable and unhappy state. By referring to her agnosticism as a "tabula rasa" of faith, she suggests that she has returned to a state of pre-belief, in which she might rebuild her belief system from scratch. What she describes next, her response to her involuntary de-conversion and her method of re-conversion ironically retraces an almost step-by-step guide to fetishism, exactly the process that Feuerbach identifies as evidence that Christianity remains a form of fetishism, as humans project their own best qualities on an idea, an unseen deity. For Cobbe, however, hers is a carefully constructed process in three successive phases. First, in an effort to pull herself out of a state of near-despair after her de-conversion, she asks herself, "Can I not rise once more, conquer my faults, and live up to my own idea of what is right and good? Even though there be no life after death, I may yet deserve my own respect here and now, and, if there be a God, He must approve me" (92). With this determination, Cobbe models fetishism at its most basic level – an individual projecting her idea of approval on in idea of God. This is not so different than her early belief in Peter, but with one key distinction: the narrative of Peter was presented to her by others, and this newly formed idea of what God might be is entirely her own.

She supplements her new idea of God with "largely Deist" readings, and notably refers to this phase of her belief as her "indigenous religion." Her use of the term "indigenous" seems to convey that it is a more natural and instinctive stage of belief that has yet to evolve to its final form, which is, from her perspective, Theism. With this

phrase, she critiques the flaws of her own belief at this stage and implicitly critiques individuals who have yet to move beyond it; once again the narrator plays the role of critic to the false, or incomplete, beliefs of her younger self. Yet at the same time, the milestones in her journey toward Theism are most often instances in which she projects her own best qualities onto the idea of God. She notes that her Deism was lifted to a higher plane by a simple revelation: "one day while praying quietly, the thought came to me with extraordinary lucidity: 'God's goodness is what I mean by Goodness...He is Just as I understand Justice, only more perfectly just. He is Good as I understand Goodness, only more perfectly good.'" This revelation prepares her for the final turn from Deism to Theism, which she identifies as the moment "when our faith transcends all that can be gleaned from the testimony of the bodily senses and accepts as supremely trustworthy, the direct Divine teaching" (98).

Both Maggie and young Cobbe arrive at a point at which they seem to waver between continuing a life of renunciation and fully embracing a world of love and faith. They both see the decision between the two states of belief in melodramatically black and white terms. Maggie believes she must either renounce all love or be consumed by the heartache of loving three different men in three different ways. Cobbe believes she must either believe all of the dogmas of Evangelical Christianity, or none. As they become aware of more nuanced versions of the alternatives to renunciation, they actually move closer to reclaiming childhood beliefs. Maggie will be re-united with Tom, and Cobbe will reclaim her faith in immortality, which will ultimately allow her to be re-united with her mother. The means by which they return to these beliefs is not entirely within their control, despite their best efforts at renunciation. They are both plagued by

indecision and ambiguity, and find that their final "decisions" to re-claim those faiths are less a matter of choice and more a product of revelation and providential intervention.

This is best illustrated by Maggie's two life-altering experiences on the River. Her decision to get in the boat with Stephen was a decision only by virtue of her failing to make one. She both wants and does not want to be in the boat with him, and the decision to stay in the boat is made for her by a force completely outside of herself, the river.

After returning home, miserably heartbroken that her non-decision to stay in the boat with Stephen has separated her from Tom's love and approval, Maggie seizes upon an opportunity to re-write the river scene with the flood. The same outside force that caused her to drift along in the boat with Stephen has provided her with an opportunity to re-unite with Tom. This time she actively rows upstream to fight against this force, but her effort is just a means to an end that only the river can provide. It is a cleansing, purifying force of nature that brings them back together and authenticates her belief in Tom's love for her.<sup>11</sup>

This conclusion manifests not only the power of the river, but also the power of Maggie's love for Tom. Her frustrated desire to be united with him was the impetus for

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11 In "Intelligence as Deception: The Mill on the Floss," George Levine identifies these two water-scenes as allusions to the Feuerbachian system in which water represents a sacrament, and has two seemingly contrasting effects: it can nullify human mental activity (represented by Maggie falling into oblivion during the course of her boat ride with Stephen) and it can wash away the scales from one's eyes (represented by Maggie's final reflections during her boat ride with Tom about how the "artificial vestures" separating them in life are weaker than the power of being "one with each other in primitive mortal needs"). As an extreme example of "bathing," the flood brings Maggie and Tom to the "first, though lowest of virtues" (Feuerbach qtd. In Levine 409). Ironically, they and St. Ogg's are destroyed by this purifying sacrament that would otherwise be the first step toward "the higher, active creative virtues of man's full consciousness and power" (409).

the attic scene, and has ruled over her much of her life. Idolizing him and longing for his approval, she is confused and unhappy in choices that separate her from his favor – from taking the larger piece of pastry when they are young children, to meeting Philip in the Red Deeps, to finding herself alone in a boat with Stephen Guest. Her desire for Tom's approval is the driving force of her short life, and it becomes even more difficult to obtain after Tom signs the oath against the Wakems in the family Bible. When she rows out in the boat to save him, she is striving to save and reclaim a childish belief.<sup>12</sup> But this sweet reconciliation is inspired, and only possible by the flood – a force beyond Maggie's control.

In some ways, Maggie's search for Tom after the flood begins is analogous to Cobbe's slow return to a belief in Heaven. The reclaimed belief in the doctrine of immortality will reunite Cobbe with her beloved mother, the primary reason why her temporary loss of faith in this doctrine brought on such great misery. Even after she had claimed Theism, and even after her mother died, she continued to renounce her belief in the Evangelical doctrine of immortality. It is a point of pride that she can say,

I was not then or at any time one of those fortunate people who can suddenly cast aside the conclusions which they have reached by careful intellectual processes, and leap to opposite opinions at the call of sentiment. I played no tricks with my convictions, but strove as best I could to endure the awful strain and to recognize the Divine Justice and Goodness through the darkness of death.(100)

It is only after engaging in a deeper study of Theism that she is able to believe once again in the idea of a life after death, but once again it is an extension of her own projection of human ideas onto a deity, for immortality is the "indispensable corollary of

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<sup>12</sup> Helen V. Emmitt also reads the flood as vehicle for a return to childhood; it allows Maggie to return to the past, and because "the immediate past is unredeemable" she has to go back much further, "to a time before all the betrayals of adulthood" and only the flood, and death, makes this possible (319).

the goodness of God." She is glad to say that she "Recovering this faith, as I may say, rationally, and not by any gust of emotion, I had the inexpressible happiness of thinking henceforth of my mother as still existing in God's universe, and (as well I know) loving me wherever she might be, and under whatever loftier condition of being" (103). While it is something she has longed for, there is no grand intervention like the flood in *The Mill of the Floss* to reunite her with her father's belief that she would one day be reunited with her mother in Heaven.

Herein lies what seems to be the most important distinction between Frances Power Cobbe's *Life* and *The Mill on the Floss* and the the point at which Cobbe's autobiography serves as a critique of Eliot's novel. For Cobbe claims that her reconciliation with the doctrine of immortality was not precipitated by the flood of emotion after her mother's death. Thus she distinguishes between this impulsive creation of fetishes and the careful more methodical way that she re-creates her belief in heaven.

But even so, that methodical approach does not completely negate the possibility of re-enchanting the world. Even Cobbe's re-conversion to a belief in the goodness of God came to her in a moment of "lucidity" as in an epiphany. She wants to believe what her careful study has deemed incredible. Like Maggie, she is drawn into a current of thought that leads her right back to where she started. But instead of being destroyed by the inevitability of provincial fetishism (represented by the flood) Cobbe believes that she can appropriate, and thus become empowered by it. And as her words condemning George Eliot's agnosticism indicate, she values a belief in a higher power – whether that being is created by a fetishistic impulse or not.

Although both Cobbe and Maggie make a return to the most cherished beliefs of their youth, Cobbe claims to do so on her own terms. She distinguishes her belief in Theism from her childish, primitive belief in Peter, her Evangelicalism, and her agnosticism partly because she has actively chosen it, rather than accepting it as a fetish presented to her by others. In doing so, she is able to embrace the inevitability of fetishism rather than denying it, and she is empowered by working through its phases rather than being destroyed by them. If the adult female is subject to forming beliefs according to fetishistic patterns, Cobbe makes it clear that these need not be the same fetishes of her youth – it is a universal and inevitable pattern present in all belief systems, and her ability to methodically work through that pattern, and acknowledge the inability to escape the fetish triangle, wins her remarkable self-awareness. Even more importantly, by openly serving as both narrator and subject, fetish critic and fetishist, she presents a new model for the Victorian woman: she can simultaneously be subject to fetishism and develop a mastery over it.

## Conclusion

In the context of the Victorian ideology of separate spheres, the three classical appeals of the rhetorical triangle were effectively split between male and female. Logos was the realm of the male, pathos the realm of the female, and ethos was divided along gender lines, with different qualities required of males and females to deem them good. A good man speaking well was understood, but a good woman speaking well was an oxymoron, for she could not both be good and participate in the public sphere. She would, however, be expected to be fluent in the matters of the heart and in all things relegated to the private, domestic sphere.

According to Armstrong, the domestic novel helped to create these distinctions, becoming the medium through which domestic concerns were explored, expressed, and challenged. In this way, the novel creates the conditions for its own existence and success, but only because it simultaneously creates and defies the divisions between public and private. The novel is written in private about a private experience and likewise read in private, creating yet another private experience in the reader, but in order to complete this transaction between writer and reader the novel must enter the public marketplace; therefore, Charlotte Brontë and Marian Evans were not alone in choosing male pseudonyms in order to usher their stories of women's private experience into the public realm. By way of the novel, female writers effectively propel domestic heroines, along with their private experience and domestic worlds into the lives and worlds of thousands of real-world readers, thus creating a model and a means of women speaking well – in public.

My three chapters evaluate the novel's effectiveness in shaping female private experience, specifically in the areas of spiritual formation, by pairing mid-nineteenth-century novels with late-Victorian autobiographies. Annie Besant, Mary Anne Hearn, and Frances Power Cobbe do indeed build on models set forth by their fictional counterparts, a pattern of influence most apparent when we read the novels and autobiographies through the lens of the evangelical conversion narrative and the classical rhetorical triangle.

But the juxtaposition of these autobiographies with *Jane Eyre*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *The Mill on the Floss* also encourages us to identify elements of artistry in the autobiographies that may be less noticeable when read alone. Besant, Hearn and Cobbe often interrupt narrative flow with long passages detailing their many efforts to improve conditions of life in England for the poor and disenfranchised. Likewise they reproduce excerpts and sometimes complete versions of their own previously published essays instead of translating those ideas into the form of recollected personal narrative. When focusing on these elements of their autobiographies we are likely to see only the influence of the more traditionally male autobiographical genre of *res gestae*, recounting “things done,” or to read their autobiographies as catalogs of nineteenth-century activism. But when juxtaposed with fictional examples by other women, and read through the lens of the evangelical conversion narrative, these passages becomes means by which a narrator can shape a self to present to the reader, and hence a measure of her spiritual growth.

Pairing fiction and non-fiction also reminds us that the novelist has the luxury of inventing her subject's experience, while the autobiographer does not. Even though the

autobiographer's depiction of her subject is limited to the remembered events of her own past experiences, however, she is free to create or borrow from several patterns of interpretation. For example, Frances Power Cobbe cannot invent a flood (as Eliot does for Maggie) to sweep her away and clearly mark her final conversion to Theism, but she can identify and attempt to understand the long steady pull back to a set of beliefs that have enchanted her world since childhood. Where the novelists invent domestic reunions to coincide with, or represent allegorically, a reconciliation between faith and some form of doubt, the autobiographers each specifically name their new religious identity. Juxtaposing the autobiographies with these novels allows us to how the novels' domestic allegories translate into the real lives of three women who write their version of the spiritual autobiography from three very different religious perspectives.

Though all three are born into evangelical homes, they invoke the evangelical conversion narrative to describe their unconventional spiritual journeys. Within this paradigm, de-conversions are cast as conversion experiences, as when Besant “comes forward” in the empty church to testify to her rejection of faith; within it non-religious experiences are cast as parallel to or competing or competing with traditional conversion experiences, as when Hearn “confesses” her determination to pursue a life of reading and writing.

These narrators further demonstrate the flexibility of the genre by writing from different points along a spectrum of beliefs about the nature of the spiritual realm. Cobbe's Theism allows for only a minimum of divine intervention in the world, only enough to let her re-claim her cherished childhood belief in immortality. Hearn remains Christian, maintaining a non-sectarian but traditionally evangelical view of the

divine. Besant travels from one end of this spectrum to the other, as she discards Christianity to first claim Theism and then theism, and finally the Theosophical belief in a spirituality that transcends all cultures.

Despite (or in some cases, because of) this diversity these women interacted with one another. Besant, for example, quotes Cobbe directly, when explaining her own turn from Theism to secularism: “Of all impossible things, the most impossible must surely be that a man should dream something of the good and the noble and that it should prove at last that his Creator was less good and less noble than he had dreamed” (91). At this point in her journey Besant has become uncomfortable with a faith that projects the qualities of man's imagination upon an idea of God (offering a Feuerbachian critique of Theism) and asks, “but what if God were only man's own image reflected in the mirror of man's mind? What if man were the creator, not the revelation of his God?” (91)

Mary Anne Hearn met Frances Power Cobbe through a mutual friend, during the last decade of Cobbe's life, and she was appointed one of the directors of Cobbe's library when it was bequeathed to the village of Barmouth, where Hearn retired. She recalls Cobbe's vivid personality, sharp mind and charming conversation. She also admired Cobbe's work for women's rights; after attending a lecture delivered by Cobbe in 1890, she recalls, “As I looked around on the great company of well-dressed women, chiefly young, I wondered if they knew all that Miss Cobbe had done for our sex,” remarking that Cobbe “made history as well as lived it” (238). Hearn also remembers that Cobbe congratulated her for remaining in journalism, even late in her life.

These autobiographers' stories also converge in the fact they all had long careers as public speakers. Cobbe was perhaps the best known of the three, speaking out for women's rights and against animal vivisection. The dramatic scene in Sisbey chapel, in Besant's autobiography, discussed in chapter one, is cast as a spiritual experience, in which Besant is called to a life of public speaking. Both Cobbe and Besant write confidently of speaking, as if it were a matter of course, but Mary Anne Hearn remembers some anxiety about her first speaking engagements, first only speaking to all-female audiences, and then worrying that her readers would be disappointed when they discovered she was "plain" and prematurely gray. She worried that the discrepancy between her readers' expectations and the reality of her appearance would result in a decrease in popularity of her column in *The Christian World* (156). Of course she is delighted when her lecture circuit actually increases sales, but this uncertainty about her right to claim the podium is consistent with her uncertainty about her right to claim the title of author, as discussed in chapter two.

The fact that these women became well-known for speaking well in public validates the strategy of reading their autobiographies through the lens of the rhetorical appeals, suggesting that these autobiographies adopt the persuasive mode they practiced so often in public venues. The significance of public speaking in their lives also asks us to consider the ways the three novels treated here not only helped to redefine women's private experience, but also helped expand women's roles in public. And perhaps this had much to do with the ways that the narrators of *Jane Eyre*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *The Mill on the Floss* expertly employ and exploit the rhetorical appeals even in an ostensibly private narrator-reader relationship.

While making a case for expanding women's roles, these narrators of fictional autobiographies also model skills that serve women equally well in both the public and private sphere. *Jane Eyre* models the ability to create an intimate relationship with her reader or listener while maintaining privacy. *Aurora* models the careful construction of a new artist's persona, one that must sustain her in both public and private experience. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* models a rigorous scrutiny of belief systems, including those that would limit women's roles. These novels help to enact cultural change that in turn opens doors for Besant, Hearn and Cobbe to speak well in public. It is their public work, and their public personae that create a curiosity about their private lives and thus a demand for and interest in their spiritual autobiographies. Such attention to the spiritual formation of real-life Victorian women is thus both a product of and a challenge to the examples of women's interiority imagined and deployed by mid-Victorian novels.

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