

Forming Wisdom: Biblical Criticism, Creative Interpretation,  
and the Poetics of the Victorian Sage

by

Denae Dyck

Master of Arts, Dalhousie University, 2015  
Bachelor of Arts, Ambrose University, 2014

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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## Abstract

Although the Bible retained substantial cultural currency throughout the Victorian period (1837–1901), new approaches in biblical criticism challenged accepted ideas about its divine inspiration and theological unity. This dissertation shows that the pressures exerted by this biblical criticism prompted Victorian writers to undertake an imaginative recovery of wisdom literature. Adapting wisdom literature’s characteristic forms in their own works of poetry, fiction and non-fiction prose, these writers constructed dynamic frameworks of revelation and authority. My study analyzes a series of strategically chosen case studies from the 1840s to the 1880s: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *A Drama of Exile* (1844), George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858), George Eliot’s *Romola* (1862–63), John Ruskin’s *The Queen of the Air* (1869), and Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). This selection brings together writers who self-identified as Christian but whose eclectic ideas set them apart from their contemporaries, as well as those who rejected Christianity but nonetheless engaged thoughtfully with biblical texts in their own writing. By demonstrating that these writers used wisdom literature to productively re-imagine the experiences of questioning and doubt, this dissertation contributes to the interdisciplinary project of reassessing religion and secularization in the nineteenth century. More specifically, my focus on biblical wisdom literature aims to revise and supplement the critical paradigm of the Victorian sage, which has come to define scholarly understanding of biblical allusion and literary authority in this period. Where previous studies have focused on the sage’s prophetic rhetoric, this dissertation argues that adaptations of wisdom literature generated an alternative mode of writing, one characterized by an artistic and heuristic poetics.

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## **Dedication**

For my teachers.

## Introduction

“Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.”

– Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967)

“But, surely, Criticism itself is an art. And just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty . . . so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word.”

– Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist* (1891)

From his vantage point at the end of the Victorian era, Oscar Wilde described this period’s intellectual dynamism as the product of twin forces: “the nineteenth century is a turning point in history, simply on account of the work of two men, Darwin and Renan, the one the critic of the Book of Nature, the other the critic of the books of God. Not to recognise this is to miss the meaning of one of the most important eras in the progress of the world” (407). One of many witticisms offered by the savant Gilbert in Wilde’s entertaining philosophical dialogue *The Critic as Artist* (1891), this hyperbolic yet telling remark positioned Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory and Ernest Renan’s biblical scholarship as having equal cultural weight. However, in their assessments of what Wilde emphatically identified as a “turning point in history,” twentieth and twenty-first century literary scholars have for many decades paid far more attention to Darwin than to Renan.<sup>1</sup> Recent work has begun to illuminate the effects of Renan and his contemporaries, highlighting the literary implications of nineteenth-century biblical scholarship. Studies

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<sup>1</sup> Both Timothy Larsen and Charles LaPorte have recently remarked the asymmetry in scholarly attention to the rise of evolutionary theory, on the one hand, and new methods in biblical criticism, on the other. They note that this asymmetry does not accurately reflect nineteenth-century patterns of thought. See Larsen’s *Contested Christianity* (43) and LaPorte’s “Victorian Literature, Religion, and Secularization” (281). Studies on Darwin and Victorian literature range from Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983) to George Levine’s *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World* (2006).

such as Charles LaPorte's *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (2011) have given special emphasis to the ways in which Victorian literature recovers and repositions prophetic discourse. This examination of the poet as prophet shows how the Victorians inherited and adapted the Romantic model of the poet as *vates* (seer) exemplified in William Blake, a model often used to subvert or reconfigure established religious traditions. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the other genres and authorial modes that were adapted by Victorians writing in response to this biblical scholarship.

My own study investigates these formal issues, examining how both the findings and the methods of new approaches in biblical criticism prompted Victorian writers to undertake a creative recovery of wisdom literature. I thereby inquire into the role of literary form in registering widespread cultural debates about authority and interpretation. These debates arose in response to the scholarship generally referred to as "the higher criticism," which originated in the work of eighteenth-century German scholars and made its way into English translation in Britain by the middle decades of the nineteenth century. This criticism challenged accepted ideas about the Bible's divine inspiration and theological unity, emphasizing instead its diverse historical contexts, composite authorship, and generic plurality. Unlike traditional exegetical methods such as typology, which presupposed the Bible's special revelatory status, the higher criticism studied the Bible "*like any other book*," as the Anglican cleric and classical scholar Benjamin Jowett summarized it in 1860 (504). The higher critics provoked substantial controversy because they presented the Bible as consisting of heterogeneous documents that featured different voices and conflicting theological positions—as a fragmentary and dialogic text, to use

our twenty-first century critical parlance.<sup>2</sup> My analysis of Victorian responses to these developments in biblical scholarship focuses on the genre of biblical wisdom literature (by which I mean the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, as well as the Gospel parables). As my discussion will show, wisdom literature presents a strategic opportunity to explore the theory and practice of biblical interpretation because so much of this literature is explicitly concerned with the search for order, purpose, and meaning. Accordingly, my research pursues this question: given the pressures exerted by the higher criticism, how did Victorian writers adapt biblical wisdom literature to construct dynamic frameworks of revelation and authority?

My question arises from critical conversations that have emerged across the fields of sociology, history, religious studies, and literary studies as scholars have brought their own disciplinary methods to bear on the contested issue of what secularization means and how it occurs. Recent studies of Victorian culture have questioned the once widely held assumptions about the widespread and linear decline of faith in the nineteenth century, uncovering the variety and vitality of the period's religious expressions.<sup>3</sup> Within this wider discussion, my work builds on and responds to previous studies of how Victorian literature demonstrates an emerging understanding of the Bible as cultural discourse

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<sup>2</sup> My terminology evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's influential concept of dialogism, which he theorizes in relation to the hybrid form of the novel and his larger concept of verbal discourse as a social phenomenon. In contradistinction to "monologic" discourse, which refuses to acknowledge that it is always already constituted in relation to other formations, "dialogic" discourse acknowledges the inevitable confluence of many different voices, ideologies, and meanings. See Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, especially "Discourse in the Novel" (259-275). Various twentieth and twenty-first century biblical scholars have thoughtfully and productively applied Bakhtin's theories to Christianity's sacred texts, as will be noted elsewhere in my study.

<sup>3</sup> The next section of my introduction will offer a more detailed survey of this interdisciplinary scholarship, giving special emphasis to its impact on literary studies.

rather than as religious dogma.<sup>4</sup> LaPorte’s work, in particular, has called attention to these issues: his book *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (2011) demonstrates that “the higher criticism helped to inspire a great range of poetic experiments” (22), and his subsequent articles highlight the theological roots of literary studies that continue to inform and shape twenty-first century critical practices (“Victorian Literature” 278-80; “Romantic Cults” 247-48). My study, in turn, aims to illuminate the higher criticism’s influence on the Victorian rediscovery of biblical wisdom literature. As I will demonstrate, debates about the inspiration of scripture, the unity of the biblical canon, and the divinity of Jesus brought into sharp relief the theological and formal qualities that distinguish wisdom literature. These qualities allowed Victorian writers to question authoritarian claims about Christianity’s sacred texts and to conceptualize religious experience as an ongoing process of searching.

To place the higher criticism within a wider arc in intellectual history and to analyze the formal qualities of biblical wisdom literature, my study draws from the theoretical work of Paul Ricoeur. As first articulated in his early book *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967), Ricoeur’s ideas about the conflict—and, moreover, the potential rapprochement—of philosophical and religious approaches to the interpretation of symbols provides a useful lens for re-examining nineteenth-century higher critical debates. While Ricoeur has been most often remembered for the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that he identified as characteristic of the post-Marxist, post-Nietzschean, and

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<sup>4</sup> Studies that pursue this more particular line of inquiry include Stephen Prickett’s *Origin of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible* (1996), Suzy Anger’s *Victorian Interpretation* (2005), J. Russell Perkin’s *Theology and the Victorian Novel* (2011), Norman Vance’s *Bible and Novel* (2013), and Mark Knight’s *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel* (2019).

post-Freudian era, his interpretive model advances a dialectic between suspicion of meaning and restoration of meaning.<sup>5</sup> Even as Ricoeur affirms the critical gains that result from the advent of so-called “modernity,” he indicates that these gains are themselves incomplete: “Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again,” he reflects (*The Symbolism* 349). His biblically resonant diction underscores that the demythologization of sacred stories might coexist with a revitalization of these myths.

Between what Ricoeur identifies as the “two impasses” of philosophy and religion, he proposes to explore a third way, which he characterizes as a mode of “creative interpretation” that combines rigorous critique and reverent reflection (*The Symbolism* 348). I employ this dialectical model to illuminate the complex responses to the higher criticism that are evident in Victorian literature that rewrites biblical texts in the wake of this historical moment. On the one hand, these creative rewritings participate in the higher critical project of challenging canonical authority; on the other hand, their imaginative qualities depart from the higher criticism’s methodological emphasis on historical recovery, instead reasserting the value of mystery and metaphor. Ricoeur’s later work on metaphor and parable, as well as on the plurality of genres included within the biblical canon, further informs my formalist study.<sup>6</sup> As Ricoeur underscores, different genres construct revelation differently: wisdom literature, in particular, brings together revelation and concealment and invites the reader’s participation in forming meaning (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 87-88). My study applies these theoretical insights to analyze

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<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur advances this concept most fully in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970). Rita Felski’s discussion of Ricoeur in her recent book *The Limits of Critique* (2015) notes and exemplifies the extent to which Ricoeur has been remembered primarily for his idea of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (1-4).

<sup>6</sup> I make particular use of Ricoeur’s essays “Biblical Hermeneutics” (1979), “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation” (1980), and “Experience and Language in Religious Discourse” (1992).

both the interpretive debates surrounding the higher criticism and the literary forms that the Victorians adapted and developed in response to these debates.

By making biblical wisdom literature my intertextual and conceptual basis, I aim to revise and supplement the critical paradigm of Victorian sage writing, which has come to define scholarly understanding of biblical allusion and literary authority in this historical period. First theorized in John Holloway's *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (1953) and developed by George P. Landow in *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (1986), this category has been applied primarily to non-fiction prose written by male authors who adapted the voice and stance of the biblical prophets for the purposes of social critique: key figures include Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, and John Ruskin. Subsequent scholarship has expanded sage writing's boundaries in terms of both genre and gender, beginning with the essays collected in Thaïs E. Morgan's edited volume *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power* (1990).<sup>7</sup> As Gavin Budge put it in 2005, Holloway's "remarkably influential" monograph has not only prompted a number of subsequent studies but also generated a critical milieu wherein casual references to "the Victorian sage" have become "embedded" in "critical thinking about the nineteenth-century assertion of writerly authority" (1). This influential paradigm has expanded considerably since its inception, but the consistent focus on adaptations of prophetic discourse does not account for how the Victorians transformed other biblical genres. Furthermore, most criticism has

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<sup>7</sup> Morgan's edited collection features essays on women writers including Florence Nightingale, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and Christina Rossetti. The genres and subgenres discussed range across nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. Subsequent feminist scholarship that applies and critiques the paradigm of sage writing includes studies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry by Marjorie Stone (1995), Linda Lewis (1998), and Karen Dieleman (2012).

understood the sage's biblical allusions primarily within a typological framework, without considering the influence of the competing and conflicting interpretive practices of the higher critics. My analysis of different literary forms (biblical wisdom texts) and interpretive practices (responses to the higher criticism), in turn, re-examines the sage's function as interpretive and moral guide. Whereas earlier studies have emphasized the prophetic sage's special claim to transcendent insight, I argue that Victorian rewritings of biblical wisdom literature work less to prescribe a definitive interpretation than to catalyze the reader's own reflective processes.

The lack of attention to wisdom literature as a formal or conceptual category in previous studies of sage writing is surprising given that Victorian writers, including those considered to be sages, engaged with this literature in overt and thought-provoking ways. For instance, when Carlyle expounded on the Gospel of Work that came to define the Victorian ethos, he underscored labour's urgency by loosely quoting from Ecclesiastes 9:10, which in the Authorized King James Version reads, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest" ("Characteristics" 310; *Sartor Resartus* 149).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in their responses to innovations in biblical scholarship, writers from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Benjamin Jowett and Matthew Arnold turned to biblical wisdom literature as a means of approaching the questions raised by the higher criticism. In his posthumously published *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840), Coleridge identified the Book of Job as "the crucial test case" for disproving narrowly literalist

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<sup>8</sup> The two passages from Carlyle repeat most words of this verse but do not replicate it exactly. Unless otherwise noted, all my quotations from biblical texts are taken from the Authorized King James Version (1611) because this is the translation that circulated the most widely in Victorian Britain.

understandings of inspiration as divine dictation (*Collected Works* 11.1136). He argued for a more malleable concept of what it means for a text to be inspired, aiming to navigate a middle path between traditional, literalist exegesis and the emerging methods of the higher criticism. Jowett's controversial "On the Interpretation of Scripture" (1860) developed and intensified Coleridge's claims. While Jowett defended the higher critical emphasis on recovering the historical situation of biblical texts, he also offered suggestive remarks about the literary qualities of particular books. He named Job and Ecclesiastes as requiring the reader to adopt a reflective, introspective mode, claiming that these texts possess "germs of truth" that had yet to be explored even in his own time (503). Similarly, Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* (1871), a series of essays on biblical interpretation that were informed by the higher criticism, further called attention to the metaphorical characteristics of biblical texts, including wisdom literature. Arnold underscored that the very term *God* does not have scientific precision but is filled with poetic ambiguity: in making his attendant argument that "*religion is morality touched by emotion*," Arnold frequently quoted Proverbs and alluded to both Job and Ecclesiastes (21-37).<sup>9</sup> Regardless of their ideological differences, Coleridge, Jowett, and Arnold all evoked wisdom literature to position biblical texts less as unified divine pronouncements than as incomplete attempts to express something that eludes human comprehension.

As these examples suggest, Victorian adaptations of wisdom literature provide an underexamined yet crucial indicator of the higher criticism's literary legacies. While these three works of non-fiction prose respond directly to debates about biblical

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<sup>9</sup> Arnold's essays were released serially in the *Cornhill Magazine* in July and October 1871 and published as a volume in February 1873 by Smith, Elder, and Company. His references to wisdom literature are extensive, including Proverbs 20:13; 12:28; 11:19; 13:15; 7:3; 3:3; 4:13; Ecclesiastes 7:29; and Job 28:28.

interpretation, this pattern invites attention to texts of other genres that respond to the higher criticism in subtler but no less significant ways. Indeed, Ricoeur's concept of "creative interpretation," positioned as a *via media* between philosophical study and religious exegesis, invites a capacious approach (*The Symbolism* 348). My own application of this concept works expansively: I use the descriptor "creative interpretation" to highlight Victorian rewritings of biblical wisdom literature that participate in higher critical debates in innovative and artistic ways. These rewritings are in keeping with what Ricoeur describes as the attempt "to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative" (*The Symbolism* 350). Considered within the context of nineteenth-century intellectual history, this more flexible and generative idea of criticism recalls Wilde's chiasmic claim in *The Critic as Artist*: "just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty . . . so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word" (364). Admittedly, Wilde's treatise on aestheticism stood at some remove from the higher criticism: its primary emphasis was on critiquing realist objectivity and championing a subjective, autotelic creed of "art for art's sake." Even so, Wilde's innovative use of wisdom literature's forms, both classical and biblical, is notable: his adaptation of Socratic dialogue and his aphoristic turns of phrase create a didactic voice that is as at once instructive and playfully subversive.

In keeping with the cross-genre approach that has characterized studies of Victorian sage writing since the 1990s, my primary texts span the genres of poetry, novels, and non-fiction prose. Rather than work on the basis of more traditional genre categories, I select texts by virtue of their adaptation of biblical wisdom literature. Just as Landow's fourfold model of the sage's "prophetic pattern" draws attention to the features

of a particular biblical discourse as well as to direct quotations from prophetic literature (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 41-72), my study concentrates on Victorian texts that not only allude to biblical wisdom literature but also imitate and develop its characteristic forms. These forms include the dramatic poem, the aphorism, the parable, and the hymn to personified wisdom. My first four chapters illustrate each of these forms, while my fifth and final chapter reflects on aspects of several of these forms vis-à-vis the autobiographical narrative patterning evident in *Ecclesiastes*.

To further refine the critical vocabulary that has been habitually applied to the Victorian sage, my formalist analysis employs Ricoeur's categories of *rhetoric* and *poetics*, distinctions that pertain less to kinds of literature than to particular uses of language. For Ricoeur, rhetoric and poetics denote two distinct and "reciprocally inverse" functions: the former "aims at persuading men by giving to discourse pleasing ornaments," while the latter "aims at redescribing reality by the twisting pathway of heuristic fiction" ("Biblical Hermeneutics" 88). Since Holloway's 1953 book on the sage, subtitled *Studies in Argument*, scholars have consistently focused on argumentative persuasion—on what Budge terms a "rhetorical mode" seen as characteristic of much Victorian prose of thought (1). This rhetorical mode embeds a distinctly authoritarian voice, where the sage demonstrates interpretive superiority through forceful elocution and speaks from a position of "conscious opposition to his audience," as Landow puts it (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 55). Nineteenth-century readers, too, remarked this hierarchical and adversarial stance: Ralph Jessop observes that from the 1840s onwards, "descriptions of Carlyle as a prophet or sage were often negative" (22). By contrast, I argue that Victorian adaptations of biblical wisdom literature can be more precisely theorized through

Ricoeur's concept of poetics. These creative interpretations do not prescribe a fixed interpretation but invite the reader's participation in an open-ended act of meaning-making. My reassessment of Victorian sage writing, then, advances a threefold shift: from typology to the higher criticism (interpretive context), from prophecy to wisdom (intertextual basis and literary form), and from rhetoric to poetics (authorial voice).

The primary texts selected provide a series of strategically chosen case studies that exemplify the development of wisdom literature's forms in relation to observable patterns in the circulation and reception of the higher criticism. I concentrate on the 1840s to the 1880s, the decades that witnessed the most debate about biblical exegesis in the British periodical press. Because the higher criticism provoked a particularly strong reaction from non-conformist Protestants, I focus on Victorian writers whose receptive yet critical responses to this criticism distanced them, to varying degrees, from the dissenting communities from which they originated. As a result, my study places on a continuum writers who identified as Christian but whose eclectic engagement with biblical texts set them apart from their non-conformist Protestant contemporaries (Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George MacDonald), along with writers who ostensibly rejected Christianity but nonetheless engaged rigorously with biblical wisdom literature in their own writings (George Eliot, John Ruskin, and Olive Schreiner). Ordered chronologically by publication date of the major work under examination, each of my chapters focuses on one writer and text, drawing from the writer's own correspondence and journals to highlight evidence of their engagement with the higher criticism.

Positioning all five of these writers in dialogue with key debates about biblical interpretation, I show that their work illuminates both the higher criticism's possibilities

and its limitations. Their creative interpretations demonstrate that the higher criticism's challenge to canonical authority and to literalist exegesis gave rise to imaginative literary work. At the same time, their imaginative revisions depart from and even resist the higher criticism's emphasis on recovering historical context and authorial intent. Rather than claim either to hold or to disprove certain knowledge of divine activity, these Victorian sages combine searching inquiry with reverence for mystery: they thereby invite readers to participate in an expansive and creative process of forming wisdom, both as a textual experience and as an embodied practice.

### **Reassessing the Victorian "Crisis of Faith"**

By reconsidering the accepted critical paradigm of the Victorian sage, I aim to show how this long-established and still-influential model might be revised in light of the interdisciplinary "religious turn" that has informed the past two decades of Victorian studies. Earlier work on the sage by Holloway and others reflects once widely held assumptions about the secularization of nineteenth-century thought, whereby the advent of modern science and other related cultural formations generated a widespread "crisis of faith" that led to Christianity's demise. Studies of secularization that follow this linear model include sociologist Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967) and historian Owen Chadwick's *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (1975). Beginning in the 1990s, however, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and religious studies scholars have reappraised the presence and function of religion in Victorian Britain, as exemplified in the diverse and persuasive work of scholars including Callum Brown, William McKelvy, and

Charles Taylor.<sup>10</sup> Some scholars continue to support the older models of secularization, notably Steve Bruce's *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (2010); even so, the ongoing debates about this issue underscore the extent to which *secular* is itself a vexed term. Taylor's widely influential *A Secular Age* (2007), for one, uses *secularization* to refer not to the eradication of religious beliefs but to the proliferation of many different existential positions—a concept that LaPorte rightly characterizes as similar to what other scholars, following Jürgens Habermas, refer to as “post-secular” (“Victorian Literature” 281).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the word *secular* is itself a Victorian invention with a complex history: coined by the newspaper editor George Jacob Holyoake in 1851, it was championed by anti-religious freethinkers such as the radical politician Charles Bradlaugh. Even so, this word derives from the Latin noun *saeculum*, used in the Vulgate (the Latin Bible of the Roman Catholic Church) to translate the Greek *aion* (age) and employed in liturgical formulae to bridge the “time-bound world” and “God’s eternity,” as Norman Vance notes (17). While this term remains a contested one, the many revisions to the secularization thesis in recent decades have on the whole emphasized that, far from displaying a linear and uniform “crisis of faith,” the nineteenth century might better be characterized as a time of religious controversy and dynamism.

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<sup>10</sup> See Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001), which dates secularization as beginning not in the nineteenth century but following the Second World War; McKelvy's *The English Cult of Literature* (2007), which underscores the role of religious ideas in mid-Victorian cultural debates; and Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), which calls attention to the many new believing and unbelieving positions that became possible following the growth of eighteenth-century humanism into the nineteenth century. For useful summaries of how the critical landscape has changed in light of such work, see David Nash (65-72) and LaPorte (“Victorian Literature” 277-80).

<sup>11</sup> On the term “post-secular,” see Habermas's article “Notes on Post-Secular Society” (17-29). For literary scholarship that mobilizes this framework, albeit in some different contexts and with additional caveats, see Joshua King's “A Post-Secular Victorian Study” (58-68) and Lori Branch and Mark Knight's “Why the Post-Secular Matters” (493-507).

In Victorian studies, scholarship on the significance, durability, and evolution of religion in literature continues to see substantial growth: the journal *Nineteenth-Century Literature* released a double special issue on “New Religious Movements and Secularization” in the fall of 2018 (vol. 73, no. 2-3, edited by Charles LaPorte and Sebastian Lecourt), and since 2012 many different monographs on Victorian topics have been published in Ohio State University Press’s series on “Literature, Religion, and Post-Secular Studies” (edited by Lori Branch). These books include Gail Turley Houston’s *Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God* (2013), Joshua King’s *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain’s Age of Print* (2015), Mark Knight’s *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel* (2019), and Winter Jade Werner’s *Missionary Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2020). This series’ recent collection *Constructing Nineteenth-Century Religion: Literary, Historical, and Religious Studies in Dialogue* (2019, edited by King and Werner) furthers interdisciplinary conversations on this topic. Work featured in this collection also examines how the particular discipline of literary studies, a latecomer to these discussions, has long been embedded in critical narratives of religious decline.

The argument that the proper study of literature fulfills a cultural and personal function that was once met through religious devotion found emphatic expression in the work of Matthew Arnold, one of the most prolific Victorian sages. From “Dover Beach” (1867) to “The Study of Poetry” (1880), Arnold repeatedly suggested that religion as traditionally practiced was receding and predicted that it would be succeeded by a new cult of poetry—so much so that the basic claim that the fall of religion led to the rise of literary studies has recently been termed “the Arnoldian replacement theory” by Michael

Kaufmann (qtd. in LaPorte, “Victorian Literature” 287).<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, this seeming substitution is not nearly as tidy as it might first appear. In his contribution to the *Constructing Nineteenth-Century Religion* volume, LaPorte observes that the supposedly secular literary criticism that scholars have practiced following Arnold actually “tends to perpetuate devotional attitudes to literature”; LaPorte suggests, moreover, that it may be neither possible nor desirable for literary studies to discard these religious roots (“Romantic Cults” 247-48). In my own analysis of the biblical rewritings that arose in conjunction with the higher criticism, I call further attention to the complex and ongoing impact of nineteenth-century debates about religious revelation.

Insofar as my argument contributes to the broad critical project of reassessing the Victorian “crisis of faith,” my focus is not on large-scale social patterns but on particular writers and texts. While all five of my chapters discuss the various (and overlapping) contexts of dissenting Protestantism that these authors both participated in and distanced themselves from, I place greater emphasis on individual examples of interpretive theory and literary form. My chapters follow a single-author, single-text structure that necessarily restricts the scope of my claims yet allows for an in-depth consideration of the five cases in question. Moreover, the forms of wisdom literature on view in my study invite—arguably, demand—an intensive and individualized approach, given that these forms are designed to inculcate reflection and meditation. Even though my argument is not primarily biographical in its aims, it does have a modest biographical component: where relevant, my chapters draw from the letters and journals of the primary authors to

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<sup>12</sup> The complexities of Arnold’s own stance on secularization have recently and perceptively been reassessed by Sebastian Lecourt. See *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination* (68-84).

highlight their knowledge of and responses to the higher criticism. As I suggest in each of my chapters, these rewritings of biblical wisdom literature generate a nuanced paradigm of spiritual searching, one that exceeds dichotomous categories of faith and doubt because it depends on acts of questioning.

My emphasis on questioning offers a means of reappraising the intellectual trajectories of the individual Victorian writers under examination. I thereby respond to previous studies that critique the loss-of-faith paradigm that was once widely applied to Victorian intellectuals. Taylor lays the groundwork for such reappraisal in his critique of “subtraction stories”—that is, cultural or critical narratives that characterize the advent of modernity in terms of the decline of religion and the disenchantment of the world. As Taylor argues, what is at stake in the transition from secularity to modernity is not the absolute disappearance of ideas about God’s presence but, rather, the repositioning of these ideas and the rise of many culturally accepted belief systems (26-27). The historian Timothy Larsen takes another perspective in his account of nineteenth-century intellectual history, arguing that “the nineteenth-century crisis of faith is a motif that has become vastly overblown” (*Crisis of Doubt* 1). In his book *Crisis of Doubt* (2006), Larsen inverts the loss-of-faith narrative that was once regarded as the typical Victorian pattern: he examines a group of secularist leaders who ultimately reconverted to Christianity—specifically, William Hone, Frederic Rowland Young, Thomas Cooper, John Henry Gordon, Joseph Barker, John Bagnall Bebbington, and George Sexton (17). The historian David Nash suggests another model, proposing that the “restrictive characterization of ‘crisis’” might be better replaced with attention to the “essential capacity as religious/philosophical *seekers*” that many Victorian intellectuals

demonstrated (70). As my own chapters move through writers who self-identified as Christians yet experimented with eclectic ideas to writers who ostensibly rejected Christianity yet insistently returned to biblical texts, I trace similar patterns of seeking.

Although many recent studies of religion and literature in the Victorian era focus specifically on women, my study of spiritual seekers considers women and men together.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, my reassessment of the Victorian sage follows in the footsteps of Morgan's edited volume (1990), which first expanded the category of sage writing from its traditional identification with masculinity. Morgan's collection, *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, features essays that show how the prophetic paradigm of Victorian sage writing can be applied to various women writers, including Florence Nightingale, Charlotte Brontë, and Christina Rossetti; other contributions to this same volume consider how discourses of femininity operate in the work of Carlyle and Ruskin. My own approach to the cultural discourse of sage writing vis-à-vis wisdom literature necessarily gives some consideration to gender, particularly in relation to the biblical tradition of personifying Wisdom as feminine. I address issues related to gender on a case-by-case basis in my chapters, contextualizing these issues in relation to the higher criticism. Importantly, the higher criticism itself was put to feminist uses by late nineteenth-century women writers who used its findings to challenge

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<sup>13</sup> Recent monographs in literary studies include F. Elizabeth Gray's *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (2009), Karen Dieleman's *Religious Imaginaries* (2012), and Gail Turley Houston's *Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God* (2013). Gender emerges as an important category in work by historians on nineteenth-century British religious culture. Brown's *Death of Christian Britain*, for example, specifically considers gender in discourses of piety (58-88). More recent studies, including the respective work of Alex Owen and Joy Dixon, have drawn attention to the intersection of gender and alternative religious movements such as theosophy. See Owen's *The Darkened Room* (1989) and *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (2004); see also Dixon's *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (2001).

misogynistic applications of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> While tracing the nineteenth-century advent of feminist theology is beyond the scope of the present project, my analysis of mid-century debates about biblical authority and inspiration calls attention to some of the issues that informed later feminist revisions of Christianity.

While the five Victorian writers examined in my study (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George MacDonald, George Eliot, John Ruskin, and Olive Schreiner) differ in their individual beliefs, all were heavily influenced by non-conformist Protestant traditions in their early years. Furthermore, all five later distanced themselves from these church communities, though they differed in the ways that they articulated their individual belief positions. My focus on writers who departed from non-conformist Protestant contexts in various ways is strategic given my interest in the higher criticism's impact on Victorian Britain. Even though Victorian Christians of all denominational affiliations, as well as Victorian Jews, registered the impact of new developments in biblical scholarship, the effects of this criticism were felt especially keenly among dissenting Protestants. Their *sola scriptura* (only scripture) creed meant that interpretive traditions such as liturgy or other church rituals carried little weight; instead, dissenting Protestants held to a "theoretical commitment to the Bible's independence from (or self-sufficient sovereignty over) subsequent traditions of interpretation" that made the higher criticism particularly contentious for them, as LaPorte explains (*Victorian Poets* 17). Many non-conformist Protestant believers were adamantly opposed to the higher criticism: the Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, for instance, suggested that the higher

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<sup>14</sup> These feminist applications will receive further consideration as appropriate throughout my chapters. See also Galia Ofek's work on how New Woman writers responded to challenges of biblical canonicity resulting from the higher criticism (165-78).

criticism might be more accurately termed “the Profaner Cavilling” (qtd. in Larsen *A People*, 286). If this derisive slur dismisses the higher criticism as trivial, debates within the periodical press indicate that most other non-conformist Protestants saw this criticism as a forceful opponent.

As my study will highlight, the higher criticism found some defenders among liberally minded Unitarian theologians at the same time that it met with denunciations from other dissenting Protestants. Consider, for instance, David Friedrich Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* (1835), which Larsen identifies as likely to have “induced more crises of faith” than any other book in Victorian Britain, including Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) (*Contested Christianity* 43). Strauss’s incendiary account portrayed Jesus as human (not as Christ) and discredited claims about prophecies and miracles. Some Unitarian thinkers were receptive to this scholarship, including the scholar Charles Hennell, whose wife, Elizabeth or “Rufa” (née Brabant), began the translation that was completed in 1846 by George Eliot. Most dissenting Protestants, however, were deeply opposed to this work, as exemplified in the reactionary rebuttal by the Scottish lawyer and Christian apologist William Gillespie, entitled, *The Truth of the Evangelical History of Our Lord Jesus Christ: Proved, in Opposition to Dr. D. F. Strauss, the Chief of Modern Disbelievers in Revelation* (1856) (Larsen, *Contested Christianity* 53). Another case in point, the Congregationalist biblical scholar Samuel Davidson was forced to resign his position from Lancashire Independent College in 1859 simply for making moderate concessions to German biblical scholarship: he rejected Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and argued that the Bible could be inspired without being infallible (Larsen, *Contested Christianity* 60). Furthermore, when the collectively authored *Essays*

*and Reviews* was published in 1860 by liberally minded British theologians and scholars who defended the higher criticism, most dissenting Protestants protested. *Essays and Reviews* had seven authors (Frederick Temple, Rowland Williams, Baden Powell, Henry Bristow Wilson, Mark Pattison, Charles Wycliffe Goodwin, and Benjamin Jowett), all of whom except Goodwin were ordained Anglican ministers. These writers were dubbed by their detractors the *Septum Contra Christum* (the seven against Christ), as James C. Livingston notes.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in their discussion of the impact of *Essays and Reviews*, Mark Knight and Emma Mason observe that this collection “elicited a far stronger reaction” from periodicals like the *Christian Observer* than what had been directed against Darwin’s *Origin of Species* the previous year (131).<sup>16</sup>

Against the backdrop of this heated resistance, the more open-minded responses that are evident in the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (hereafter, EBB) and George MacDonald, the writers examined in my first and second chapters, are particularly striking.<sup>17</sup> While EBB identified herself as “a Congregational Christian” with regards to most of her beliefs, her religious vision ranged eclectically from an interest in biblical hermeneutics to a fascination with Swedenborgian mysticism in the late 1840s and 1850s

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<sup>15</sup> The expression *Septum Contra Christum* (Seven Against Christ) puns on the tragedy by the Greek playwright Aeschylus *The Seven Against Thebes*. This turn of phrase seems a little ironic, given that one of the points that made *Essays and Reviews* so controversial was that it opened the door on comparative religious study. Jowett, who wrote the final essay in the collection, was one of the leading Platonists of mid-Victorian Britain and taught at Oxford. Two of the contributors to *Essays and Reviews* (Henry Bristow Wilson and Rowland Williams) were tried for heresy in the Court of Arches, though they were acquitted on appeal. For further discussion of the reception of *Essays and Reviews*, see Shea and Whitla (28-54).

<sup>16</sup> In addition to these responses from the periodical press, some “orthodox” British Christians launched an adamant pushback to *Essays and Reviews* entitled *Aids to Faith* (1861), as Vance observes (86).

<sup>17</sup> Following the conventions of the editors of the five-volume Pickering and Chatto edition of *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (2010), I refer to the poet as EBB. She used these initials as her poetic signature both before and after her marriage to Robert Browning on 12 September 1846.

and an interest in spiritualist seances in the final years of her life (*The Brownings' Correspondence* 4:150). Her correspondence shows that she was conversant with higher critical debates, and her poetry offers innovative, and potentially subversive, rewritings of biblical texts. For his part, MacDonald briefly served as the pastor of a Congregational Church in Arundel (1851–53) but was forced to resign because of his liberal ideas, including his openness to German biblical scholarship. While MacDonald maintained a firm commitment to the divinity of Jesus throughout his literary career, his publications and letters show that his ideas about biblical inspiration differed significantly from the concept of literal divine dictation upheld by most of his Congregationalist contemporaries. In a letter written in 1866, he went so far as to say that “the common theory of the inspiration of the words [of scripture]” was “degrading and evil,” claiming that this theory made believers into “idolaters of the Bible instead of disciples of Jesus” (*An Expression* 153-54). While MacDonald’s knowledge of and receptiveness to German biblical scholarship clearly differed in degree from that of writers like Eliot, he nevertheless used higher critical debates as an opportunity to reframe and re-imagine biblical texts. To better understand the revisionary work offered by writers ranging from MacDonald to Eliot, my study contextualizes this work in relation to the interpretive assumptions that the higher criticism challenged as it spread throughout Victorian Britain.

### **Biblical Criticism in Victorian Britain**

The developments in biblical criticism that inform my argument have their roots in scholarship that emerged in the eighteenth century, but the effect of this scholarship was not felt in Britain on a broad scale until the middle of the nineteenth century because much of this scholarship was written in German and not translated into English until

some decades after its initial publication.<sup>18</sup> The phrase “the higher criticism” (*die höhere Kritik*) was coined by Johann Gottfried Eichhorn in the preface to the second edition of his *Einleitung ins Alte Testament (Studies in the Old Testament)* (1787); one of its earliest English uses appeared in the work of John Kendrick, a Unitarian biblical scholar who had studied at Göttingen under Eichhorn and his contemporaries. Kendrick’s essay “On the Mythical Interpretation of the Bible,” published in 1827 in the *Monthly Repository*, employed the term “the higher criticism” to discuss both German biblical criticism and the emergence of comparative mythology (Vance 81). This term gets its meaning partly in distinction from “the lower criticism”: while “the lower criticism” sought to determine which biblical manuscripts were the most reliable texts, the higher criticism aimed to develop methods for textual interpretation. These methods approached the Bible as a combination of history and mythology, rather than as a purely factual record. Johann Gottfried Herder, a contemporary of Eichhorn, described the higher criticism’s basic principle as a commitment to reading the Bible *menschlich* (“in the human way”) (qtd. in LaPorte *Victorian Poets* 6). This “human way” went against the grain of Christian exegetical practices that emphasized scripture’s divine origins.

Chief among these exegetical practices was typology, which figures heavily in Landow’s discussions of biblical interpretation in nineteenth-century Britain and, more specifically, of the interpretive work of the Victorian sage.<sup>19</sup> As an interpretive framework, typology presupposes the unity of the Old and New Testaments, thereby

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the rise of historical approaches to biblical scholarship in the eighteenth century, see Hans W. Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (51-65).

<sup>19</sup> While this emphasis emerges across various studies of the sage, Landow’s *Elegant Jeremiahs* most clearly sets the precedent for the focus on typology (27-29). This book follows Landow’s earlier *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought* (1980).

appropriating and subordinating Jewish traditions according to a Christocentric pattern. In effect, typological exegesis reads scripture as an account of sacred history whereby the rituals, events, and people recorded in the Hebrew scriptures anticipate, often in an incomplete or imperfect way, what was later fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as Landow explains, the typology practiced in Victorian Britain rested on “a non-canonical belief that God had dictated every word of the Bible”—that is, the doctrine of verbal inspiration (*Victorian Types* 55). While Landow recognizes that this doctrine began to lose its credibility in the 1860s as a result of the higher criticism’s spread, he emphasizes that many non-conformist Protestants upheld typology in an attempt “to maintain a belief in the absolute historical truth of the Bible long after leading continental thinkers had abandoned such possibilities” (*Victorian Types* 57). Typological habits of thought persisted long after their religious basis had been called into question, as Landow shows convincingly through examples from both literature and the visual arts. Without discounting typology’s tremendous influence as a cultural force, my study calls attention to the ways that typology became modulated as a result of the advent of the higher criticism. As my chapters underscore, the higher criticism directly challenged several of the ideas that underpinned typology, including belief in scripture’s verbal inspiration and theological unity, as well as in the divinity of Jesus.

New developments in textual scholarship, including the source criticism that foregrounded the composite authorship of biblical texts, generated substantial debate

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<sup>20</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of typology’s appropriation and subordination of Jewish traditions within the context of Victorian literature and culture, see Cynthia Scheinberg’s *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (32-35).

about the theological concept of inspiration.<sup>21</sup> Coleridge positioned this issue at the front and centre of his series of epistolary essays that were posthumously published as *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*. These essays were entitled “Letters on the Inspiration of the Scriptures” in manuscript form but renamed by his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge so as to sound less confrontational to conservative religious readers in 1840.<sup>22</sup> By 1860, the year that *Essays and Reviews* defended higher critical principles to a wider reading public, Jowett remarked, “the word inspiration has received more numerous gradations and distinctions of meaning than perhaps any other in the whole of theology” (485). These debates were further registered through the language used in the Revised Version of the New Testament that was published in 1881, as Vance explains.<sup>23</sup> The first authorized translation since the King James Version of 1611, the Revised Version changed the wording of 2 Timothy 3:16 in ways that reflect the controversies regarding inspiration, as Vance observes. Where the King James Version declares “All scripture is given by God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,” the revisers wrote “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness” (qtd. in Vance 87). While this alteration might seem very modest to twenty-first century readers, Vance reminds us that it would have seemed “dangerously weaker” to the biblical

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<sup>21</sup> These developments in biblical source criticism will be discussed in more detail in my first chapter.

<sup>22</sup> See Anthony John Harding’s discussion of the publication and reception of *Confessions* (74-100).

<sup>23</sup> A Revised Version of the Old Testament followed in 1885, and the apocryphal books were published in 1889. Because the installments of the Revised Version post-date the composition of all five of my primary texts and the publication of four of them, I use the Authorized King James Version for all biblical quotations in my chapters unless otherwise noted. All the primary authors on view in my study, as well as their Victorian audiences, would have been steeped in the phrases and cadences of the Authorized Version. See David Norton’s discussion of the colossal influence exerted by the language of the King James Bible on Victorian culture and literature (299-330).

literalists of the Victorian age (87). In effect, this modification draws attention to the crucial question of whether every letter of the Bible in itself *is* the Word of God or whether the various books of the Bible in some way *bring forth* the Word of God.

In addition to underscoring the composite authorship of biblical books, the higher criticism highlighted the theological contradictions and historical inaccuracies within biblical texts that could (and often were) used to heighten doubts about biblical authority. From the eighteenth century onwards, some German biblical scholars such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Hermann Samuel Reimarus “jettisoned supernatural beliefs and claimed to find distortion, superstition, and forgery in the scriptures,” as Daniel L. Pals summarizes (9). While my study will emphasize that not all of the higher critics or those who were receptive to them took such an adversarial stance towards the Bible, it is important to note that this scholarship generated criticism on both historical and moral grounds. In Britain, the biblical scholar J. W. Colenso, Bishop of Natal and author of several mathematics textbooks, applied a very literal method of the higher criticism’s historical approach: his *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (1862) critiqued the dates, dimensions, and other figures in the opening six books of the Bible to show their inaccuracies and impossibilities. Colenso’s aim in doing so was not to overturn biblical authority altogether but to reform church dogmas that were based on a commitment to the exact words of scripture. Unfortunately, most of his Victorian audiences did not appreciate these efforts; Colenso’s book was widely condemned, and he himself was tried for heresy, though acquitted on appeal.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to Colenso’s

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<sup>24</sup> See Larsen’s thoughtful and detailed discussion of Colenso’s reception and the controversies that his work on the Pentateuch provoked (*Contested Christianity* 59-77).

intentions, his work fueled the moral critique of Christianity offered by Victorian secularists including Charles Bradlaugh, the founder of the National Secular Society and its journal, *The National Reformer*. In his polemic *The Bible: What It Is* (1870), Bradlaugh made frequent references to Colenso to advance his own anti-biblical rhetoric yet failed to consider the prospect “that the bishop’s ability to accept these critical points without abandoning his Christian identity” might count against his own interpretation of this mathematical critique, as Larsen has shown (*Contested Christianity* 106). Colenso’s case demonstrates that even though the higher criticism was sometimes identified as being anti-Christian or put to anti-Christian uses, what was really under fire was less the Bible itself than particular methods of reading it—methods that were based on a literal understanding of the Christian scriptures as set apart from all other texts.

As underscored in Kendrick’s 1827 review essay on the higher criticism, these innovations in biblical scholarship developed as part of early forays into comparative mythology and the study of comparative religion. By the mid-nineteenth century, the philologist Friedrich Max Müller had established a non-doctrinal and textually rigorous approach to comparative mythology that became widely known as “the science of religion.” Several of the higher critics were philologists and Orientalists who contributed to this broader endeavour—Renan, whom Wilde references in *The Critic as Artist* for his biblical scholarship, wrote on the prophet Muhammad and the history of Islam as well. Even as these early forays into comparative religion upheld hierarchical categories indicative of the imperialist, racist, and anti-Semitic ideologies that circulated in nineteenth-century European culture, such scholarship played a role in displacing

Christianity from its privileged cultural position in the West.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, Victorian Britain saw the rise of various syncretistic and experimental religious movements that drew from the spiritual teachings of many different traditions.<sup>26</sup> My study focuses on higher critical readings of biblical texts, without giving concentrated attention to comparative religious study and new religious movements. In modest ways, however, my analysis shows that biblical wisdom literature, with its emphasis on questioning, pushes against the canonical boundaries of Christianity and invites inquiry beyond any single religion.

At the same time that the higher criticism situated Christianity within the context of other mythological traditions, it also generated debates about the divinity of Jesus. While Renan's work as a philologist and historian of religion was wide-ranging, he was best known in Victorian Britain for his *Vie de Jésus (Life of Jesus)* (1863), one of several volumes in his *Histoire des Origines du Christianisme (History of the Origins of Christianity)* (1863–83). Like his precursor Strauss, Renan approached the Gospels as historical documents and portrayed Jesus as human rather than divine. The studies of both Strauss and Renan were tremendously controversial in Victorian Britain, giving rise to what Daniel L. Pals describes as a series of Victorian "Lives of Christ" throughout the

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<sup>25</sup> For further discussion of Renan's work within the wider context of Victorian discourses of philology and anthropology, see Lecourt (72-6). Other recent studies of Victorian literature and the rise of comparative religion show how this field of study contributed to the rise of alternative forms of belief, including spiritualism and theosophy. See, for example, J. Jeffrey Franklin's *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain* (2018).

<sup>26</sup> Arguably the most notable among these new movements was Madame Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. Founded in 1875, the Theosophical Society had an international following that included prominent Victorian intellectuals such as Annie Besant, who became the society's president in 1907. Recent critical discussions of the rise in experimental religious movements at the end of the nineteenth century are featured in the 2018 double special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Literature* on "New Religious Movements and Secularization." See especially the articles by Gauri Viswanathan (161-86), Mimi Wimick (187-226), L. Ashley Squires (353-78), and Mark Knight (379-98).

1860s and 1870s (3). These biographical accounts responded to the higher critical studies that were skeptical of all supernatural events in the Gospels: the Victorian “Lives of Christ” ranged from devotional accounts that made mild concessions to the higher criticism to more emphatically conservative reactions against these developments in biblical scholarship.<sup>27</sup> Further debate was generated by the anonymously published *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Christ* (1865), which in Pals’s words “edged its way quietly between the sceptical productions of continental criticism and the devotional, conservative works which prevailed in Britain” (40).<sup>28</sup> Written by John Seeley, Professor of Latin at University College, London, *Ecce Homo* adopted aspects of the historical critical approaches of Renan and Strauss; however, instead of advancing an outright denial of the Bible’s verbal inspiration and Jesus’ divinity, Seeley chose to sidestep these issues altogether. The resulting ambiguity generated substantial debate in the British periodical press: readers found it difficult to discern whether *Ecce Homo* was the work of an apologist or a skeptic, as Pals explains in his overview of the book’s reception (40-50).

My study suggests that even some of the higher critical works that at first glance appeared opposed to Christianity reflected and invited a more complex stance toward the Bible than would at first appear. While critical of religious doctrines, many of the higher critics and those responding to them appreciated the literary power of biblical texts.

Consider, for example, George Eliot (the pseudonym adopted by Mary Anne Evans), the

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<sup>27</sup> Such work includes F. W. Farrar’s *The Life of Christ* (1874), Henry James Coleridge’s *The Public Life of Our Lord* (1874), G. S. Drew’s *The Son of Man* (1875), and John Cunningham Geikie’s *The Life and Words of Christ* (1877). See Pals’s discussion of these studies (80-94).

<sup>28</sup> The title of this book has, since its publication in 1865, followed this hybridization of Latin and English, though the work itself is in English. “Ecce homo” (behold the man) refers to the Vulgate’s translation of the words used by Pontius Pilate when presenting Jesus before the crowd in the Gospel of John (19:5).

focus of my third and central chapter. Eliot translated several works of German biblical scholarship into English: her translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* was published in 1846, her translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen Des Chrestentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*) was published in 1854, and she reviewed other related biblical scholarship for the *Westminster Review*.<sup>29</sup> Even though Eliot clearly distanced herself from her evangelical roots, her writings suggest an ongoing esteem for some aspects of biblical texts. In 1842, shortly after she had announced to her family her refusal to attend church, she wrote to her father that while she regarded Christianity's "system of doctrines" as "most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness," she herself had much admiration for "the moral teaching of Jesus himself" (*Letters* 1:128). More strikingly still, a letter dated 14 February 1846 and sent by her close friend Caroline Bray to their mutual friend Sara Sophia Hennell reported that Eliot was "Strauss-sick," claiming the translator said that "it made her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion" (*Letters* 1:206). These expressions suggest a visceral disquiet with higher critical analysis. Eliot, along with the other writers in my study, combines an interest in higher critical interpretive practices with an openness to poetry and mystery that does not tidily align with the higher criticism's dominant emphasis on historical context. As my chapters show, the creative reinterpretations performed by these Victorian writers align in prescient, compelling ways with the work of later hermeneutic thinkers such as Ricoeur.

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<sup>29</sup> In 1856, Eliot published a review of James Heywood's two-volume *Introduction to the Book of Genesis* (1855), an abridged translation of Peter Von Bohlen's *Die Genesis, historischkritisch erläutert* (1835).

### Creative Interpretation from Renan to Ricoeur

When higher critics such as Strauss and Renan applied the language of mythology to the stories of Jesus, they offended Victorian Christians who held firmly to the literal truth of biblical texts. However, most of these critics aimed not to discredit biblical texts altogether but to emphasize that these texts should be read as fictional rather than literal accounts. While Strauss was widely denounced as an opponent of Christianity, his biblical scholarship was far more appreciative of Christianity than that of some of his more extremely skeptical precursors such as Reimarus and Lessing, as Larsen explains (*Contested Christianity* 53-54). In the conclusion to his *Das Leben Jesu*, Strauss himself reflected that the relationship between faith and doubt is far from simple: “just as the believer is intrinsically a sceptic or critic, so, on the other hand, the critic is intrinsically a believer,” he remarks (757).<sup>30</sup> Renan’s subsequent work advanced a similarly complex formulation in his concept of *le grand scepticisme*, which Bernard Reardon parses loosely as “a fruitful skepticism,” one that differs markedly from the “negative attitude” of “Voltarian mockery, which aims to destroy its targets” (260). Reardon further characterizes Renan’s particular form of skepticism as emanating from the idea that “a man’s dogmatism must always be critical, tempered with doubt” because “one knows that the truth one possesses is not absolute” (261). Care must be taken lest the skeptic’s objections become the new dogmatic orthodoxy.

These examples from nineteenth-century hermeneutic thinkers suggest that demythologizing and remythologizing might operate in a dialectical pattern. Indeed, the

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<sup>30</sup> All quotations from *Das Leben Jesu* are taken from Eliot’s translation.

very word *hermeneutics*, for all that it has come to be associated with dispassionate and critically rigorous theories of interpretation, has distinctly theological origins. As David Jasper observes, this word “has its origins in the activity of the Greek god Hermes, the messenger whose task it was to interpret to people of the earth the messages and secrets of the Olympic gods” (37). In recent years, literary critics have underscored these theological underpinnings; such scholarship invites further attention to the interpretive practices of Victorian writers responding to the biblical higher critics who laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in the field of hermeneutics.

Among literary scholars today, there is a growing interest in what LaPorte calls “post-suspicion” hermeneutics, such as Eve Sedgwick’s turn to affective modes of reading and Rita Felski’s reservations about the project of critique (“Romantic Cults” 258). Suggesting that these developments might “dovetail meaningfully with the religious turn in twenty-first-century literary criticism,” LaPorte briefly names Ricoeur’s writings, informed as they are by his Protestant heritage, as potentially useful in this context. Working with Ricoeur at more length and in greater detail, my work mobilizes his concept of “creative interpretation.” Ricoeur introduces this concept as a proposed response to the classic problem of the hermeneutic circle—that is, the dilemma that “we must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand” (*The Symbolism* 351). Furthermore, the concept of creative interpretation demands a renewed attention to metaphor’s dynamic capacity, an idea encapsulated in aphoristic form in the conclusion to *The Symbolism of Evil*, entitled “The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought.” His subsequent work on metaphor and parable further develops this line of thought, emphasizing that “the process of interpretation is not something superimposed from the

outside of a self-contained expression; it is motivated by the symbolic expression which itself gives rise to the thought” (“Biblical Hermeneutics” 133). As Ricoeur shows at greater length in his essay “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” different biblical discourses (his categories include prophetic, wisdom, narrative, hymnic, and prescriptive discourse) provide different nuances on the idea of religious revelation. These nuances, in turn, demand careful attention to literary form. My formalist analysis coordinates Ricoeur’s theoretical insights with those of nineteenth-century higher critics, as well as with those of Victorian writers who responded to these developments in biblical scholarship. As I argue, the higher criticism had the effect of bringing into sharper relief the formal diversity of biblical texts, and this formal diversity had implications for debates about biblical revelation, inspiration, and authority.

Even though the higher criticism has been most often remembered for its historical emphasis, the higher critics, as well as the British intellectuals who engaged with their ideas, had important things to say about literary form. Hans Frei’s landmark book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (1974) argues persuasively that the higher criticism’s focus on diverse historical contexts obscured the narrative elements of biblical texts. More recently, Richard Hess’s 2016 overview of biblical criticism dates the study of formal literary categories as beginning with Herman Gunkel’s studies in the early twentieth century, which sought to go beyond nineteenth-century source criticism by recovering the artistic and imaginative qualities of the Bible’s oral traditions and written documents (38). The formalist elements of the higher criticism, however, warrant further investigation. As other twentieth-century biblical critics including Julius A. Bewer and Leo G. Perdue have

highlighted, Gunkel's work builds on insights from higher critics such as Herder, who called attention to biblical poetry's complex parallel patterning (Bewer xv; Perdue *Wisdom and Creation* 68). Within the more particular field of literary studies, Stephen Prickett has called attention to how the higher criticism led to a widespread shift away from narrower modes of typological exegesis and toward a more pluralistic understanding of biblical narrative: his publications, including *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics, and Biblical Interpretation* (1986), explore elements of this issue in relation to Romantic literature. More recently, LaPorte's *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (2011) has demonstrated the influence of biblical higher criticism on the forms of Victorian poetry. Building on and responding to these studies, I aim to show that the higher criticism underscored the Bible's generic plurality in ways that invited specific attention to the formal qualities of wisdom literature.

Held up to close examination, even some of the higher critics who seem at first to be emphatically concerned with historicity are at times more formally astute than our critical narratives tend to credit. The higher criticism's basic concern with uncovering a text's historical situation, as well as its concomitant emphasis on recovering the authorial intent of the original writer, finds emphatic expression in the work of the prolific theologian and scholar Friedrich Daniel Ernest Schleiermacher (1768-1834), one of Strauss's instructors in biblical criticism. Schleiermacher is most commonly known for his *On Religion* (1799), which in the face of a growing rationalism reasserted the integral role of individual feeling in religious experience. His lectures on hermeneutics, posthumously published in 1838, have also been widely influential, especially his twofold attention to "grammatical" interpretation (that is, the linguistic content) and

“psychological” interpretation (that is, the intent of the speaker). Even as these two aspects prompted Schleiermacher to focus on historical context, he assigned to psychological interpretation an ongoing quality: “the insistence on historical interpretation is only the correct insistence on the connection of the writers of the N.T. [New Testament] with their age. . . . But this insistence becomes mistaken if it denies the new concept-forming power of Christianity and wants to explain everything from what is already there” (*Hermeneutics and Criticism* 15). Jowett, who adopted the ideas of Schleiermacher and other German higher critics in his “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” similarly tempered his concern with history: while he claimed that “scripture has one meaning—the meaning which it had to the mind of the prophet or evangelist who first uttered or wrote it,” he claims that “the sacred writings” possess an “inexhaustible or infinite character.” He remarked, “all that the Prophet meant may not have been consciously present to his mind; there were depths which to himself also were but half revealed” (505-06). Moreover, Jowett drew attention to the fact that scripture “embraces writings of very different kinds” (487), suggesting further that Job, Ecclesiastes, and the parables of Jesus exhibit a “depth and inwardness” that “require a measure of the same qualities in the interpreter himself” (505). His brief yet suggestive remarks highlight both the Bible’s generic plurality and wisdom literature’s particular formal qualities.

While these qualities emerge in subtle ways through the writings of the higher critics, my argument brings them into sharper relief by coordinating the work of nineteenth-century biblical scholars with insights from Ricoeur and by showing that Victorian writers responding to the higher criticism anticipated the work of later hermeneutic thinkers. In their creative reinterpretations of biblical wisdom literature,

these Victorians underscore the formal multiplicity of the biblical tradition and advance a dialectical model of revelation in concealment. This emphasis on plurality and dialogism aligns with Ricoeur's approach to the Bible as literature: Ricoeur emphasizes that the "variety of discourses" within the biblical tradition give rise to "an order that is more polyphonic than typological" ("Experience" 138).<sup>31</sup> Whereas Ricoeur identifies this polyphony as a function of generic multiplicity, I argue that wisdom literature in itself encapsulates this diversity. My chapters show how the higher criticism caused typological interpretation to be adapted into a more pluralistic mode, tracing this adaptation within forms derived from biblical wisdom literature. As my fourth chapter shows, even John Ruskin, a writer whose typological habits have received extensive analysis in Landow's work, fractures typology's unifying force throughout *The Queen of the Air* (1869), a series of experimental lectures on Athena that innovatively combine classical and biblical wisdom literature. This text not only engages with the interpretive controversies generated by *Essays and Reviews* but also demonstrates a significant modulation in Ruskin's authorial voice. Rather than speaking in the denunciatory mode of the prophetic jeremiad, Ruskin's meditations on wisdom literature allow him to progress toward a dialogic openness. This dialogic openness reflects the unique theological and formal qualities of wisdom literature, qualities that took on new significance in light of higher critical debates.

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<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur differentiates his approach to the Bible as literature from that of Northrop Frye in that Frye's magisterial *The Great Code* (1982) follows a typological pattern that focuses on the Bible's imaginative unity rather than its generic plurality.

## Beyond the Prophetic Pattern

By calling attention to Victorian rewritings of biblical wisdom literature, my study aims to augment the substantial body of scholarship that concentrates on prophetic discourse in nineteenth-century British literature. In addition to the studies that have established the Victorian sage paradigm, various monographs by Romantic scholars ranging from M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1975) to Prickett's *Words and the Word* (1986) and Christopher M. Bundoock's *Romantic Prophets and the Resistance to Historicism* (2016) have highlighted the presence and significance of prophetic utterance in Romantic literature. This scholarship contextualizes the work of Blake, Coleridge, and their contemporaries in relation to developments in higher critical scholarship and shows how biblical tropes and concepts of salvific history were put to new literary purposes beyond their original religious contexts. The idea of the prophet as poet gained renewed aesthetic appreciation as the result of the publication of studies such as bishop Robert Lowth's translation of *Isaiah* (1778), which highlighted this book's parallel patterning.<sup>32</sup> Without denying the presence and significance of this prophetic paradigm, I suggest that the higher criticism further prompted Victorian writers to recover another genre altogether: wisdom literature.

Clear lines between prophetic and wisdom literatures are difficult to draw; nevertheless, prophecy and wisdom have differing theological emphases and distinctive formal qualities. On the one hand, prophecy and wisdom intersect in apocryphal texts such as the Wisdom of Solomon, which celebrates personified Wisdom as the power that

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<sup>32</sup> These developments in biblical scholarship receive further attention in my first chapter, where I discuss EBB's use of and departure from the model of poet as prophet.

enters “holy souls” and “maketh them friends of God, and prophets” (7:27)—a statement quoted by Coleridge in his *Confessions (Collected Works 11.2.1122)*. On the other hand, various biblical scholars have argued that wisdom literature is characterized by several unique features. In his commentary *The Wisdom Books* (2010), which features Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, Robert Alter notes that the category “the wisdom books” is a construct of scholarship rather than something intrinsic to the canon itself (xiii)—indeed, other groupings of biblical texts, such as the Poetic Books (which would also encompass Psalms and the Song of Solomon) or the Megilloth (Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Ruth, and Esther) would complicate this category. By way of highlighting wisdom literature’s distinctive characteristics, Alter suggests that wisdom literature has a “distinctive identity within the biblical canon” because it is “international” and arguably “universalist” as it “raises questions of value and of moral behaviour, of the meaning of human life” (xiii-xiv). Crenshaw provides a more specific catalogue of wisdom literature’s characteristic features, including “non-revelatory address, concern for unraveling life’s mysteries, an absence of sacred traditions relating to Moses, David, or the patriarchs” (*Prophets, Sages, and Poets* 48). Similarly, Ricoeur observes that biblical wisdom literature does not place the same emphasis on salvific history—or, for that matter, on the people of Israel as a nation—as do the historical and prophetic books. As Ricoeur sees it, wisdom literature offers “the great thrust of a reflection on existence that aims at the individual behind the people of the Covenant, and through him, every human being” (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 85). These features of wisdom literature invite renewed attention given the higher criticism’s challenge to the doctrine of verbal inspiration, as well as its comparative approach to religious writings.

At first glance, it might appear that the higher criticism had little to say about wisdom literature, placing greater emphasis on the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Indeed, Hess claims that the study of biblical wisdom literature as a distinctive genre began with Gunkel's studies around 1900 (481). Closer examination of the higher criticism, however, indicates that scholarly attention to wisdom literature was emerging prior to this date. In addition to the remarks about Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Gospel parables already surveyed in works by Coleridge, Jowett, and Arnold, nineteenth-century scholars offered new translations and commentaries on the wisdom books. Renan, for instance, published his own translations of the Book of Job in 1858 and the Book of Ecclesiastes in 1881. Moreover, near the end of the nineteenth century, the Anglican reverend, Oxford professor, and biblical critic Thomas Kelly Cheyne published a commentary entitled *Job and Solomon: The Wisdom of the Old Testament* (1889). Despite the conservative idea of Solomonic authorship suggested by this title, Cheyne's commentary highlighted the composite and historical qualities of all books discussed, which include Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiasticus. Cheyne claimed that the study of these books "is most refreshing after the incessant and exciting battles of Pentateuch criticism," implying that wisdom literature might take on new meaning in the light of higher critical debates (iii). The higher critical attention to the Synoptic Gospels and to biographical accounts of Jesus as human also evokes, albeit in an indirect way, conceptual issues regarding wisdom and wisdom literature. Within the Christian tradition, wisdom literature and Christology have been theologically associated at least since the thirteenth-century writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, as David Lyle Jeffrey observes:

personified Wisdom and Christ have long been typologically linked (834). By extension, then, the higher criticism's challenge to accepted ideas about Christology invites a reconsideration of biblical wisdom traditions. As my chapters will show, the remarks of nineteenth-century biblical scholars about the function of Jesus' parables as a mode of moral teaching further call attention to this particular form of wisdom literature.

Moreover, nineteenth-century theological debates about scripture's verbal inspiration warrant further inquiry into the formal qualities that, according to Ricoeur, distinguish wisdom literature from prophecy and from other biblical genres. In his essay "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Biblical Revelation" (1986), Ricoeur underscores the need for close attention to literary form, claiming that "the confession of faith expressed in the biblical documents is directly modulated by the forms of discourse wherein it is expressed" (91). Advocating for careful attention to conceptual and generic multiplicity, he states that this approach replaces a "monolithic concept of revelation" with one that is "pluralistic" and "polysemic" (75). Ricoeur claims that prophetic discourse, with its formula "thus sayeth Yahweh," has been mistakenly "taken as a basic referent" for the idea of revelation: the prophet "presents himself not as speaking in his own name, but in the name of another, in the name of Yahweh" (75). He notes the absence of this formula in biblical wisdom literature, highlighting instead wisdom literature's emphasis on the hiddenness and ineffability of "God's design" (87). Ricoeur's later essay "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse" (1992) modifies this argument by classifying the Old Testament according to the three categories of Torah, Prophets, and Writings, thus recalling traditional Jewish classifications of the Bible. Even so, these categories suggest a distinction between prophetic and wisdom literatures

because only the latter falls into the category “Writings” (139). In effect, Ricoeur’s basic claim that the prophetic and wisdom books invite different models of inspiration is anticipated by Coleridge’s *Confessions*, in the author’s account of his search for biblical evidence for the doctrine of verbal inspiration. Coleridge noted that while the Mosaic and prophetic books do make assertions about their very words being given by God, other books such as Job lack this exact claim; ultimately, he argued that the concept of inspiration pertains to the spirit rather than the letter of biblical texts (*Collected Works* 11.2.1124-25). As I demonstrate, wisdom literature helped Victorian writers to reimagine the concept of religious revelation in the wake of the higher criticism.

My combined emphasis on literary form and interpretive practice resembles the approach employed in Susan E. Colón’s *Victorian Parables* (2012). Colón integrates literary analysis, Ricoeurian hermeneutics, and twenty-first century biblical scholarship to analyze Victorian adaptations of biblical parable, though without considering the hermeneutic moment of the higher criticism.<sup>33</sup> While my work includes attention to parable as a literary form, I situate it in relation to the larger category of wisdom literature. Broadly speaking, my analysis participates in the turn to form that has informed other recent studies of Victorian literature and religion.<sup>34</sup> My approach to the

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<sup>33</sup> Colón locates the break with allegorical methods of interpreting parables as beginning with Adolf Julicher’s two-volume *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (*The Parables of Jesus*) (1888 and 1899), which laid the groundwork for the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) approach of C. H. Dodd in the early twentieth century (7-8). As I show in my third and fifth chapters, higher critics from Schleiermacher to Strauss to Renan offered important observations about parables as a literary form.

<sup>34</sup> Since the 1990s, Victorian studies has witnessed a renewed attention to literary form, often branded “new formalism” and exemplified in the work of scholars such as Herbert Tucker and Caroline Levine. The influence of this turn to form can also be seen in Kirstie Blair’s *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (2012). In their editorial introduction to the recent double special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Literature* on “New Religious Movements and Secularization,” Charles LaPorte and Sebastian Lecourt highlight close attention to literary form as a promising avenue for further inquiry (151-53).

hermeneutic debates sparked by the higher criticism emphasizes less the interpretive work *depicted within* the text than that *performed by* the text: not fictional representations of Victorian readers responding to the higher criticism but texts that dramatize the conceptual issues resulting from the higher criticism in their very form.<sup>35</sup> My title, *Forming Wisdom*, signals at once the sage's interpretive and creative activities, the critical practice of formalist analysis, and the formative energy of wisdom literature. The present participle verb suggests process rather than product, highlighting my emphasis on both the act of making and the effect of making—or, put another way, both writerly work and readerly experience. As I show in my study of five Victorian adaptations of this biblical genre, wisdom literature possesses a dynamism that is less propositional than an expression of potentiality: meaning is less something that one finds than something that one makes.

By shifting sage writing's intertextual basis from prophecy to wisdom, I aim both to address the theological concepts of inspiration and revelation and to highlight wisdom literature's distinctive mode of enunciation. Wisdom literature embeds a different speaker/audience paradigm than does the established critical paradigm of the prophetic sage, which foregrounds the sage's special claim to interpretive authority. In *Elegant Jeremiahs*, Landow goes so far as to set up a distinction between prophetic and wisdom literatures, claiming that, whereas the prophet deliberately opposes society, the wisdom writer speaks from within a society's accepted conventions (23). Held up against the

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<sup>35</sup> For this reason, I have chosen not to include in my study classic Victorian "loss of faith" novels that offer realist depictions of individuals whose beliefs were challenged as a result of their higher critical readings, such as James Anthony Froude's *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849) and Mary Augusta Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888). My individual chapters discuss and navigate this distinction between the interpretive work *depicted within* vs. that *performed by* the text on a case-by-case basis.

biblical tradition, however, this dichotomy appears reductive. Wisdom literature's radical openness to questioning, doubt, and even skepticism places it at a far remove from the established religious dogmas of nineteenth-century Britain.

This radical openness finds its most intense expression in Ecclesiastes, a biblical intertext that underpins my fifth and final chapter's discussion of Olive Schreiner's experimental first novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). In addition to her extended meditation on the third chapter of Ecclesiastes in her own central chapter entitled "Times and Seasons," Schreiner uses the forms, themes, and words of wisdom literature to call into question the doctrine of verbal inspiration. While her novel displays elements of a Transcendentalist philosophy derived from Carlyle, Schreiner describes her creative work in contradistinction to Carlyle's characteristic prophetic mode. Her preface to this novel's second edition describes her novelistic method as one wherein "nothing can be prophesied," as human beings simply "appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away" (xxxix). Schreiner's remarks about unpredictability and ineffability echo the opening lines of Ecclesiastes, "*One* generation passeth away and *another* generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever" (1:4). Yet as her novel unfolds, she couples these reflections on mortality with a reverence for mystery that again evokes and repositions the central motifs of Ecclesiastes. Schreiner, like the other Victorian writers I discuss, thus unfolds provocative and dynamic possibilities for re-reading the Bible as literature.

### **The Poetics of the Victorian Sage**

To analyze the wisdom writer's distinctive mode of utterance, with its emphases on questioning and awakening the reader's response, I draw from Ricoeur's concept of poetics. I position this category in contradistinction to the rhetorical framework that has

long been applied to the Victorian sage. Ricoeur uses *poetics* not to assert a generic distinction between poetry and prose but to highlight a particular function of language, one that he distinguishes from that performed by “descriptive” or “scientific” language. Whereas scientific discourse constructs truth on the basis of “the criteria of verification or falsification,” the “poetic function” posits truth as “manifestation”—that is, as something revealed in itself rather than something tested empirically (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 100-02). For Ricoeur, poetry, narrative, and other forms of non-fiction prose alike exhibit a poetics insofar as they depend on metaphor’s capacity to create new ways of imagining reality.<sup>36</sup> By replacing the established terminology of the sage’s *rhetoric* with an emphasis on the sage’s *poetics*, I highlight this writing’s irreducibility to propositional statements. In its pursuit of meaning, wisdom literature is more heuristic than hermeneutic, opening many different avenues for discovery rather than advancing a fixed methodological principle.

As the language of “manifestation” implies, Ricoeur applies the category of poetics to all revelatory discourse, including the various genres that he identifies within the biblical tradition (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 102-03). Like the wisdom writer, then, the prophet might also advance a poetics, and indeed much prophetic discourse of the biblical tradition clearly displays a metaphorical richness.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Victorian

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<sup>36</sup> Further explication of how Ricoeur extends this concept of poetics across conventional genre categories can be found in Gregory J. Laughrey’s *Paul Ricoeur and Living Hermeneutics* (2016), especially on pages 56-61. As Laughrey highlights, Ricoeur approaches literary form less as a taxonomic system than as a generative framework that demonstrates a text’s imaginative power. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (1990), which shows how Ricoeur’s ideas about poetics and metaphor inform his work on narrative (65-85).

<sup>37</sup> Raymond C. Van Leeuwen observes that there are strong verbal and thematic parallels between parts of Isaiah and the wisdom tradition (298). The commemorative collection *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton* (1998), edited by John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson, includes

literary scholars have consistently relied on the paradigm of rhetorical persuasion to analyze Victorian adaptations of this prophetic discourse. While this paradigm has usefully illuminated the elocutionary force of much Victorian literature, it risks obscuring the more creative elements of the sage's biblical rewritings. My approach aims to resolve the tension between argument and artistry that has emerged in studies of the sage from Holloway onwards. Though subtitled *Studies in Argument*, Holloway's book concentrates much attention on the non-logical modes of writing whereby the sage employs tropes and figurative language such as paradox to achieve both didactic and artistic effects (14-17). This tension emerges as the subject of Camille R. La Bossière's *The Victorian Fol Sage* (1989), which critiques Holloway's paradigm by identifying a "fundamental contradiction between wisdom and art" that makes "the sage's vocation" a "calling to suicide" (16, 18). According to La Bossière, the Victorian sage's attempts to educate and to persuade are necessarily futile because sage writing's experimental and artistic qualities contravene the sage's logical and argumentative goals; in effect, Holloway's study points toward the "contradiction of means and ends" that underlies Victorian sage writing (16). La Bossière thus positions wisdom, a term assumed to be integral to sage writing but never explained or contextualized, outside the realm of imagination and creativity and within the sphere of reason. By turning to nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century biblical scholarship, my reassessment of the Victorian sage emphasizes that wisdom literature is a highly artistic discourse, one not to be confused or equated with a rational or empirical concept of knowledge.

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several essays by various biblical scholars on the intersection between wisdom discourse and particular prophetic books.

My analysis amplifies Ricoeur's theoretical insights by drawing from biblical scholars who have productively applied a version of this distinction between *rhetoric* and *poetics* to highlight wisdom literature's unique functions. As Roland E. Murphy observes, the aim of wisdom literature's "dominant forms," which he identifies as "the saying, the admonition, and the wisdom poem," is "not so much to command" but to "provoke the reader into a reflective mood" (*The Tree of Life* 7). Similarly, Leo G. Perdue describes the biblical wisdom tradition as driven not by "rhetorical display or literary embellishment" but by an "artistic shaping of language" that "formed and maintained a world of beauty in which even the creator took delight" ("Cosmology 462); indeed, Perdue's book *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (1994) draws extensively from Ricoeur's work on metaphor and identifies such "world-building capacity" as integral to wisdom literature. This metaphorical multiplicity accords with what Crenshaw identifies as "the variety of phenomena" denoted by *hokmâ*, the Hebrew word for wisdom that is used variously to refer to spiritual experience, ethical understanding, practical skill, and artistic craftsmanship (*Old Testament Wisdom* 9). In the biblical tradition, wisdom literature is at once imaginative and corporeal in its formative power.

This conjunction between the metaphorical and the somatic provides an opportunity to amplify the illuminating yet incomplete terms by which Holloway and those following him have described the Victorian sage's work. Holloway characterizes sage writing in distinctly visual language: he opens his study by explaining how the Victorian sage presents the act of "acquiring wisdom" as "an opening of the eyes" and concludes by reflecting on the sage's aim to "make his readers see life and the world over

again, see it with a more searching, or perhaps a more subtle and sensitive gaze” (9, 296). As I suggest, wisdom literature’s embodied qualities find a more robust expression in Walter Benjamin’s essay on “The Storyteller,” a figure positioned as broadly contemporaneous with the Victorian sage. Benjamin’s meditations on the storyteller arise from his reflections on the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, which prompt him to express a nostalgic longing for a bygone era when experience had not fallen in value (83-5). For Benjamin, the storyteller’s task is to “fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful and unique way,” one that brings together “the soul, the eye, and the hand” through the storyteller’s craftsmanship (108). Notably, similar kinaesthetic terms find expression in the writings of prominent Victorian sages, including Carlyle’s polemics against industrialism and utilitarianism such as “The Signs of the Times” (1829) and “Characteristics,” both of which appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*. Throughout these essays, Carlyle criticizes the “mechanical” activities of scientists and political economists, while praising the “dynamical” endeavours of artists and philosophers. Benjamin and Carlyle might appear to be strange bedfellows, given Carlyle’s anti-Semitic leanings; nevertheless, Carlyle’s use of biblical wisdom literature in these and other writings to underscore the connections among work, embodiment, and wisdom calls to mind Benjamin’s conception of the storyteller’s art. Despite Carlyle’s characteristically authoritarian stance, he occasionally evinces a kinaesthetic poetics that is driven by possibility rather than pronouncement.

As suggested by this example from Carlyle, my study aims not only to expand the category of the Victorian sage but also to re-read writers who are widely considered as belonging to this established paradigm. I thereby offer an alternative genealogy of the

Victorian sage, one that focuses on higher critical hermeneutics rather than typological exegesis, wisdom rather than prophecy, and poetics rather than rhetoric. In addition to broadening the range of authors and genres associated with the Victorian sage, then, I seek to add to critical understanding of the sage's identity and purpose. The basic trajectory of my reassessment might be effectively summarized in some remarks made by one paradigmatic sage, George Eliot, about another paradigmatic sage, Carlyle. In the opening of an essay for the *Leader* (October 1855), Eliot says that Carlyle teaches us that "the most effective educator," like "the most effective writer," is not one who announces particular discoveries but one who "rouses in others the activities that must issue in discovery" (207). This particular mode of didacticism follows from the questioning forms of biblical wisdom literature, as my study demonstrates. Rather than possessing a special claim to transcendent insight, the wisdom writer catalyzes further inquiry, envisions expansive possibilities, and sets the process of questioning in motion.

### **Re-Reading Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus***

To set up my reconsideration of Victorian sage writing, I turn briefly to Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, first published in serial installments in *Fraser's Magazine* from August 1833 to November 1834. All five of the writers discussed in my chapters acknowledge Carlyle's influence even as their work departs in innovative ways from this precedent. Moreover, because Carlyle has long been regarded as the paradigmatic Victorian sage, *Sartor Resartus* offers an ideal occasion to illustrate my efforts to recontextualize this paradigm. Not only is Carlyle the first author discussed in Holloway's pioneering book, but several decades later Carol T. Christ identified Carlyle's discussion of "The Hero as Man of Letters" in his lecture series *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*

(1840) as “the definitive statement of the Victorian conception of the writer as prophet” (19). Nevertheless, the hierarchical and authoritarian stance that Carlyle asserts in this lecture series differs from the more self-reflexive and playful features exhibited in his experimental prose essay *Sartor Resartus*. This extended meditation on German idealism self-consciously foregrounds the work of interpretation: Carlyle presents his philosophical discussion as consisting in large part of the fragmentary writings of the fictitious Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (God-Breathed Devil’s-Dung), punctuated by the remarks of an unnamed Editor who translates Teufelsdröckh’s work into English and frequently comments on the difficulties of this task. At once nonfiction prose and imaginative storytelling, this multi-generic text also includes some elements of spiritual autobiography, as Teufelsdröckh recounts his intellectual and personal efforts to “embody the divine Spirit of that [Christian] Religion in a new mythus” (147). In so doing, Carlyle incorporates various biblical intertexts, drawing inventively on wisdom literature to reflect on the nature of symbols. Under the ludic and almost farcical guise of a “Philosophy of Clothes,” he advances a poetics of wonder.

This “Philosophy of Clothes” is mediated through the device of the Editor, who not only translates Teufelsdröckh’s scholarship but also provides substantial biographical information about its author, thus adapting the *bildungsroman* form. Readers trace Teufelsdröckh’s progression from “The Everlasting No,” where personal trials cause him to be assailed by religious doubts, through the wilderness of “The Centre of Indifference” to “The Everlasting Yea,” where he discovers “a new Heaven and a new Earth” and thus reconceives divinity in relation to a Transcendentalist concept of Nature (142). Rather than outline a definitive movement from or to a clearly defined position of belief or

unbelief, this trajectory suggests an organic and ongoing pursuit of truth. Carlyle's own position on Christianity was a shifting and complex one: he swerved away from the Calvinist tradition of his upbringing yet nevertheless continued to adapt this religion's symbolic language in his public writings. Whereas Friedrich Nietzsche found Carlyle fraught with hypocritical tension, terming him in *The Twilight of the Idols* (1888) "an English atheist who makes it a point of honour not to be one" (70), other Victorian intellectuals found Carlyle's stance much more compelling. Thomas Henry Huxley, widely known as "Darwin's bulldog" because of his advocacy of evolutionary theory and the coiner of the term "agnosticism" in 1869, claimed that reading *Sartor Resartus* prompted him to realize "that a deep sense of religion was compatible with the entire absence of theology" (231). Far from a dichotomy between public theism and private atheism, this paradoxical expression suggests that Carlyle's Romantic emphasis on emotion and intuition has the capacity to remake "religion" from a set of doctrinal claims about "God" to a dynamic appreciation for an unknown or even unknowable divine.

Through its exploration of what Teufelsdröckh describes as "the unfathomable, all-pervading domain of Mystery," *Sartor Resartus* repeatedly calls attention to the challenge of interpretation. Among its many other formal categories, *Sartor Resartus* takes the shape of a fictitious review essay, the very genre that helped to spread higher critical ideas throughout Victorian Britain. Both Suzy Anger and Chris R. Vanden Bossche have highlighted the extent to which Carlyle's reading of German biblical scholarship informs his literary work: Anger situates Carlyle in between Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and Calvinist exegesis (61-84), while Vanden Bossche considers how debates about religious authority inform Carlyle's concepts of social and

literary authority (41-89). Throughout *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle represents the vexed task of interpretation in the Editor's self-conscious remarks about his valiant effort "to evolve printed Creation out of a German printed and written Chaos" (62); at the same time, he further complicates this task through dense intertextuality. For instance, the Editor's reference to his translated work as the "Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh" alludes to Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760-67), a key precursor to Carlyle's work. As W. David Shaw aptly puts it, Carlyle's book "abounds in interpretations of interpretations," so much so that "no one but James Joyce, or Northrop Frye, or Coleridge perhaps, could hope to be informed or attentive enough to be an ideal reader of *Sartor Resartus*" (*Victorians and Mystery* 86). In addition to displaying Carlyle's erudition, these layered intertexts have the effect of destabilizing any single authorial utterance and inviting the reader's active participation in the quest for meaning, regardless of whether that reader is in fact "ideal."

Carlyle further destabilizes authority by depicting Teufelsdröckh as at once sage and fool, celebrating the professor as prophet while also calling attention to his limitations. He presents Teufelsdröckh in terms that recall John the Baptist, calling him a "wild Seer, shaggy, unkept" who was "living on locusts and wild honey," and describes his utterances as prophetic (23). Even so, the Editor's exclamations over the professor's lack of organization and his remarks about his "mixture of insight, inspiration, with dullness, double-vision, and even utter blindness" suggest that this ecstatic figure possesses something of the ridiculous (22). Moreover, the many biblical allusions of *Sartor Resartus* turn not only to prophets and prophecy but also to wisdom literature. In questioning the validity of science, Teufelsdröckh recalls the divine speeches of the Book

of Job (chapters 38-42) when he exclaims, “Was man with his Experience present at the Creation, then, to see how it all went on? Have any deepest scientific individuals yet dived down to the foundations of the Universe, and gauged every thing there?” (194). Carlyle’s interrogative energy builds toward an exclamation on the imaginative, generative, and ineffable power of symbols. Recapitulating the finitude/fullness dialectic that animates much biblical wisdom literature, Carlyle calls into question all manner of interpretive authorities without invalidating the search for meaning.

Throughout *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle’s emphasis on questioning shapes his novel’s didactic qualities. He himself suggested that this text’s method of teaching works in combination with a variety of other forms, describing his manuscript in a letter to publisher James Fraser on 27 May 1833 in various terms: a “Didactic Novel,” a “Satirical Extravaganza on Things in General,” and an encyclopedic volume containing “more of [his] opinions on Art, Politics, Religion, Heaven Earth and Air, than all the things [he had] yet written” (*The Carlyle Letters Online*). Yet Carlyle also invites readers to venture beyond his own “opinions.” The tension between Teufelsdröckh and the Editor, along with the text’s unruly intertextuality, gives rise to what Dino Felluga theorizes as a “radical dialogism” that anticipates Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic imagination (585). Rather than persuade the reader of some argumentative claim, *Sartor Resartus* draws the reader as interlocutor into an untidy process of making order within chaos. Such a dialogic approach follows naturally from the difference that Carlyle’s work suggests between knowledge and wisdom. Departing from St. Augustine’s classic distinction between *scientia* versus *sapientia*, whereby knowledge is of temporal things and wisdom of things eternal, Carlyle arrives at something closer to Socrates’ response to

the oracle at Delphi.<sup>38</sup> As recounted in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates affirms that the "wisest" of men is "one who knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing" (9). *Sartor Resartus* similarly negates claims to certitude, suggesting that wisdom resides in the capacity to question accepted teachings and open new avenues for finding truth. These avenues range from the sublime to the grotesque, from the impassioned exclamations in Teufelsdröckh's chapter on "Natural Supernaturalism" to the scatological humour invited by his name. However exalted, wisdom remains grounded in the work of the body.

My own chapter titles play with embodied metaphors to underscore that the process of *forming wisdom* encompasses the domains of both textual creation and embodied practice. This metaphorical conceit gestures to the biblical tradition of hypostasizing wisdom, as well as to Coleridge's compelling remarks about reframing religious revelation in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*. Coleridge refutes the doctrine of verbal inspiration, or the idea that one should "believe the Scriptures throughout dictated, in word and thought, by an infallible Intelligence," by claiming that

the doctrine in question petrifies at once the whole Body of Holy Writ, with all its harmonies & symmetrical gradations; the flexible and the rigid; the supporting Hard and the cloathing Soft; the blood that is the life; the intelligencing Nerves; and the rudely woven but soft and springy Cellular, in which all are embedded and lightly bound together! (*Collected Works* 11.2.1133)

Combining tactile and auditory imagery, Coleridge's comparison of scripture to a living organism is synaesthetic and kinaesthetic in its force. His riposte to the conservative thinkers who reacted to the higher criticism by reasserting a dogmatic literalism, then, reconceives the theological concept of a dynamic, living Word. Although some of the

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<sup>38</sup> See especially Augustine's remarks in chapter 15 of Book XII in *De Trinitate (On the Trinity)* (101-2).

writers in my study differ from Coleridge in their degrees of departure from Christianity's tenets of faith, all of them explore inventive re-readings of biblical texts to pursue an ongoing process of forming wisdom.

My five chapters illustrate five different formal adaptations of biblical wisdom literature that respond to the interpretive debates sparked by the higher criticism. Chapter 1 ("Wisdom's Tears") analyzes EBB's repositioning of the Book of Job's poetic dialogues in *A Drama of Exile* (1844), a masque-like revision of the biblical fall narrative. Chapter 2 ("Wisdom's Footsteps") examines the aphoristic and proverbial qualities of MacDonald's fairytale romance *Phantastes* (1858), which, under the guise of the medieval quest narrative, advances an eclectic and imaginative theory of interpretation. Chapter 3 ("Wisdom's Turn") focuses on Eliot's adaptation of parable in *Romola* (1862–63), an historical novel of ideas that shows Eliot's work not only as a translator but also as a practitioner of higher critical hermeneutics. Chapter 4 ("Wisdom's Reach") discusses Ruskin's range across classical and biblical traditions in his artistic personification of Wisdom in his experimental lecture series *The Queen of the Air* (1869). Chapter 5 ("Wisdom's Breath") considers Schreiner's recourse to Ecclesiastes in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which both subverts Christian dogma and makes biblical wisdom literature the basis for an alternative form of spirituality that brings together a critique of certainty with reverence for mystery. Taken together, EBB, MacDonald, Eliot, Ruskin, and Schreiner explore wisdom literature's animating combination of limitation and aspiration, expressed most pointedly in the tension between the elusiveness of meaning and the ongoing search for meaning. These

Victorian writers make this tension productive, even transformative, as their writings generate ever-new incarnations of old ideas.

## Chapter 1: Wisdom's Tears: Falling into Hope and Renewing Dialogue in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile*

Throughout her letters of the early 1840s, the aspiring poet Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett (later Elizabeth Barrett Browning and hereafter EBB) offered telling remarks about Thomas Carlyle's influence on her work. In an 1845 letter to her suitor, Robert Browning, she referred to herself as "Carlyle's disciple" (*BC* 10:81).<sup>39</sup> Less than two years earlier, she made substantial contributions to a review essay on Carlyle for R. H. Horne's *A New Spirit of the Age*: in response to Horne's invitation, she declared, "I cannot refuse the Carlyle subject," even though she described herself as presently "full of business" in writing her own poetry (*BC* 8:116).<sup>40</sup> When her next collection of poetry appeared in print, the two-volume *Poems* (1844) published by Edward Moxon, EBB went so far as to send a copy to Carlyle, whom she had never met in person.<sup>41</sup> This gesture suggests the extent to which she understood her own writings to participate in the tradition of Victorian sage writing that Carlyle initiated; at the same time, EBB herself revises this tradition by emphasizing both its poetry and its pathos, as becomes clear in her review essay. Moreover, her own poetry departs from Carlyle's authoritarian

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<sup>39</sup> As noted in my introduction, I refer to the poet as "EBB," the initials that she used as her poetic signature both before and after her marriage to Robert Browning on 12 September 1846. This practice follows the conventions used by the editors of the five-volume Pickering and Chatto edition of *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (hereafter cited parenthetically as *WEBB*). The abbreviation *BC* refers to the multivolume collection *The Brownings' Correspondence*, edited by Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson, and Scott Lewis.

<sup>40</sup> Modelled on William Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), Horne's volumes were published in 1844 by Smith, Elder, and Company. EBB's contributions to this essay receive consideration later in this chapter.

<sup>41</sup> EBB mentions sending her work to Carlyle in a letter to her friend Mary Russell Mitford dated 14 August 1844 (*BC* 9:99-102), as will be more fully explained in subsequent pages. Previously, EBB had published *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838), as well as *Prometheus Bound, Translated from the Greek of Aeschylus and Miscellaneous Poems* (1833) and *An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems* (1826). Her 1844 volume, however, was the first to be widely reviewed and acclaimed.

prophetic stance, which foregrounds the writer's own interpretive superiority. Instead, EBB conceptualizes the sage's authority as the product of dialogue. By means of dialogue, she portrays the pursuit of wisdom as a process that requires attention to many voices and emanates from the act of questioning.

To illustrate EBB's revisions to Victorian sage discourse, this chapter offers a focused examination of *A Drama of Exile*, a long poem in dramatic form originally published in two installments in the July and August 1844 issues of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* and later featured as the lead work in the 1844 Moxon collection.<sup>42</sup> Composed concurrently with the essay on Carlyle, *A Drama of Exile* responds to a wide range of literary and biblical traditions as it reinterprets the story of humankind's expulsion from Eden. The poem begins where the third chapter of Genesis concludes, an innovative starting point that distinguishes *A Drama of Exile* from its many literary precursors, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) the most prominent among them.<sup>43</sup> Rather than retell the biblical fall narrative, EBB reflects on what might be more precisely termed "the fallout of the fall," taking up challenging questions regarding the order of the cosmos and the meaning of suffering. Her revisionary engagement with biblical texts thus extends beyond the opening chapters of Genesis: she adapts both the themes and the forms of biblical wisdom literature, particularly the Book of Job. Over the

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<sup>42</sup> The serial publication of *A Drama of Exile* was undertaken by Cornelius Matthews, co-founder of the journal *Arcturus* and self-appointed "trustee" for promoting EBB's reputation in America (*BC* 7: 31). EBB had previously published several poems in American periodicals, including the *Boston Miscellany of Literature and Fashion* and *Graham's Magazine* between November 1842 and March 1844 (Joyce 402-3). An American edition of *Poems* (1844) was published as *A Drama of Exile: and Other Poems* in October 1844.

<sup>43</sup> In addition to *Paradise Lost*, important precursors for *A Drama of Exile* include George Gordon Byron's *Cain* (1821), Robert Collock's *The Course of Time* (1827), and Robert Montgomery's *The Messiah* (1832). See Marjorie Stone's analysis of the ways in which EBB "alternately imitates and revises" Byron's *Cain* (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 77-83), develops the "non-conformist politics" of Pollock's *The Course of Time*, and radically responds to Montgomery's marginalization of Eve ("A Heretic Believer" 21-23).

course of its 2270 lines, *A Drama of Exile* gives voice to Adam, Eve, Lucifer, Gabriel, Christ, Eden spirits, Earth spirits, voices in the wind, and angelic choruses. These speakers call into question the distinction between prelapsarian and postlapsarian states, the rule over nature that the Genesis 1 text assigns to humankind, and the idea that all suffering is punitive.

The biblical rewritings in *A Drama of Exile* illustrate the striking combination of searching inquiry and reverent appreciation that distinguishes EBB's religious poetry. As Cynthia Scheinberg observes, EBB's thorough and thoughtful study of Old and New Testament texts in their original languages helped her to assert "an intellectual and theological authority" seldom found in a female poet of the Victorian era (65). EBB's letters indicate that she often undertook this study in the spirit of reverent devotion, yet they further demonstrate her openness to many varieties of religious or spiritual expression. Moreover, her approach to biblical texts demonstrates appreciation for the very literary qualities that received attention in prominent German and English higher critical studies of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, as will be analyzed in more detail in the following pages. Through her reverent yet innovative engagement with biblical poetry as poetry, EBB explores the theological concepts of inspiration and revelation in ways that distance her from her dissenting Protestant contemporaries, many of whom held to literal truth of scripture's exact words, as explained in my introduction. Her recognition of the formal and conceptual plurality of biblical texts allows her to discard literalist exegesis and to pursue flexible, creative approaches to sacred stories.

By situating *A Drama of Exile* in relation to the interpretive debates sparked by the dissemination of biblical higher criticism, my argument supplements the growing body of scholarship that focuses on this poem's feminist energies. Much criticism over the past thirty years has concentrated on EBB's representation of Eve, from Dorothy Mermin's claiming of *A Drama of Exile* as "Eve's story" in 1989 to subsequent studies by Marjorie Stone, Linda Lewis, Alexandra M.B. Wörn, Karen Dieleman, and Terence Allan Hoagwood. Building on Hoagwood's discussion of this poem's recourse to "the symbolic terms of the [biblical fall] myth for representation of contemporary social themes" (173), I analyze EBB's nuanced and feminist reinterpretation of Eve as part of a larger theological project. Her engagement with the Woman Question of mid-Victorian social discourse, then, issues from her response to widespread interpretive debates regarding the authority of biblical texts and the meaning of suffering in the Christian tradition. In effect, my repositioning of EBB's feminism demonstrates one feature of my larger argument about her nuanced participation in Victorian sage writing. Responding to both Stone and Dieleman, who in their respective studies highlight the dialogical qualities that distinguish EBB's poetry from the typical utterances of the sage, I show that her commitment to dialogue issues from her formal adaptations of wisdom literature.

EBB herself positions her poem's gendered interventions as part of a revisionary project that has cosmological scope. In a letter to Horne dated 29 December 1843, she explained the twofold emphasis of her yet unfinished poem as follows: "the peculiar anguish of Eve" and "the first steps of Humanity into the world-wilderness, driven by the Curse" (*BC* 8: 116). This description signals her investment not only in Eve, the original sinner blamed throughout centuries of misogynistic exegesis, but also in theological

issues explored throughout the Book of Job. As *A Drama of Exile* unfolds, it complicates the creation narratives of Genesis 1-2, the first of which culminates in the divine decree that humans “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (1:28). EBB evokes the alternative cosmology suggested by the Book of Job’s divine speeches (chapters 38-41): she puts into the mouths of her Earth spirits the rebuking message and even some of the very words of this passage, which opens with the decentering question “Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (38:4). Through its layered biblical intertexts, *A Drama of Exile* contests the seemingly decisive closure of the biblical fall narrative. Indeed, the opening stage directions at once recall and revise the image of the flaming sword that bars the gates of Paradise (Genesis 3:24). EBB represents this sword not as a barrier but as an ongoing source of light: she opens with Adam and Eve moving “*along the sword-glare*” (*WEBB* 1:16), and the entire drama takes place within the “*extremity*” of this glow (*WEBB*: 1:20). For EBB, then, the shutting of Eden’s gates does not foreclose on a divine fullness that follows humankind into the wilderness. Her emphasis on the immanent presence of divinity even within the supposedly “fallen” world, in turn, invites a reconsideration of the experience of limitation.

*A Drama of Exile* thus performs what Paul Ricoeur identifies as one of the “fundamental functions” of the Book of Job’s wisdom literature—that is, “to bind together *ethos* and *cosmos*, the sphere of human action and the sphere of the world” by establishing “the *pathos* of actively assumed suffering.” This wisdom literature, in Ricoeur’s words, “places suffering into a meaningful context by producing the active quality of suffering” (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 86). So too, *A Drama of Exile* participates

in the task of making suffering meaningful. Drawing on biblical texts from the survey of nature in the Book of Job to the personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 to the hymn on Christ's *kenosis* (self-emptying) in Philippians 2, EBB advances a poetic theology that valorizes willing acts of self-limitation. She thereby offers a powerful reinterpretation of suffering, figuring it not as victimization but as a transformative experience of divine immanence. My chapter title signals this experience through the conceptual metaphor of "Wisdom's tears": this metaphor at once betokens sorrow and, through its suggestion of clouded vision, hints at EBB's distinctive portrayal of wisdom as acquired not through superior sight but through attentive listening.

In the pages that follow, I analyze EBB's turn to wisdom literature in relation to specific nineteenth-century developments in biblical scholarship, including studies of biblical poetry's parallel patterning, the rise of source criticism, and changing concepts of Christology. These contexts show that *A Drama of Exile* participates in a significant moment in the history of biblical interpretation: the paradigm shift whereby the Bible became widely understood "not as the product of dictation by the Holy Ghost but as the work of men," as E. S. Shaffer summarizes it (200). Through her reverent yet innovative engagement with biblical poetry as poetry, EBB questions the idea that religious revelation consists in a single and authoritative divine pronouncement. Instead, *A Drama of Exile* suggests a readerly concept of revelation as a dynamic and ongoing process—a model that aligns in prescient and compelling ways with the work of later exegetical and hermeneutic thinkers such as Ricoeur.

### “poetry glorified”: EBB and Higher Critical Studies of Biblical Poetry

The transformative hope expressed in *A Drama of Exile* issues from EBB’s understanding of the biblical canon less as unified divine revelation than as incomplete human poetry, an understanding that shows her subtle but significant affinities with biblical higher criticism. As early as 1842, EBB expressed her conviction that “Christ’s religion is essentially poetry—poetry glorified” (*BC* 5: 220); about a year later, she intensified this claim by asserting that “the *poetry of Christianity* will one day be developed greatly & nobly—& that in the meantime we are as wrong poetically as morally, in desiring to restrain it” (*BC* 7: 21).<sup>44</sup> In her emphasis on the ongoing development of “the *poetry of Christianity*,” EBB has much in common with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom she admired as a writer of great “genius” (*BC* 6:75), and the ideas about biblical interpretation that he advanced in his posthumous *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840). Coleridge’s epistolary essays, discussed more fully in my introduction, portrayed scripture as a living corpus, one that is best interpreted in “the light of the Spirit in the mind of the believer” (*Collected Works* 11.2.1167). For Coleridge, this light increases according to the believer’s growing spiritual discernment. Much like Coleridge, who sought to find a *via media* between what he saw as the extremes of both the higher criticism and literalist schools of exegesis, EBB adopted a nuanced stance regarding developments in biblical interpretation.

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<sup>44</sup> While EBB celebrated “the *poetry of Christianity*,” she distanced her ideas from the Oxford Movement’s recovery of religion as poetry, such as the ideas expressed in John Keble’s *Lectures on Poetry* (1832-41). Her letters throughout the 1840s criticize what she perceived as the exclusivism of the Oxford Movement (*BC* 9:119-20). See Kirstie Blair’s discussion of EBB’s criticism of this movement and her analysis of the poetry of the Brownings as “the strongest contemporary alternative to Tractarianism” (122-30).

Her position within nineteenth-century British Christian communities more broadly is similarly difficult to fix. Although literary criticism has often remembered EBB as a pious religious poet, such readings obscure the eclectic and even subversive qualities of her vision, which ranged from a focus on biblical exegesis in the 1830s and 1840s to a fascination with Swedenborgian mysticism in the late 1840s and 1850s to an interest in spiritualist seances during the final years of her life. Even so, shortly after EBB's death in 1861, her friend and editor Theodore Tilton eulogized her as "more devout than George Herbert, more fervid than Charles Wesley" (qtd. in Lewis 2); upon the poet's bicentenary in 2006, Stone remarked the "prevailing views of EBB as a relatively conventional Christian believer," suggesting that critics need to re-examine these views ("A Heretic" 9). Although the two writers named in Tilton's memorial effectively caption EBB's ecumenical range, his adjectives ("devout" and "fervid") obscure the more critical aspects of her engagement with Christian texts and traditions—the very features that mark her as what Stone calls "a heretic believer" ("A Heretic" 8). As Stone observes, the breadth and depth of EBB's religious writing tends to be obscured by an undue emphasis on her piety that reflects both religious and gendered binaries: for instance, the supposedly more "skeptical" poetry of Robert Browning has received significantly more attention than the "orthodox" poetry of EBB ("A Heretic" 12). Working to correct this oversimplification, Stone highlights EBB's "heterodox" and "ecumenical" Christianity, using terms that resonate with those EBB herself uses in her letters ("A Heretic" 12). She attended both Anglican and Congregational churches at various points in her life and, though she identified herself as "a Congregational Christian" in regards to her private beliefs, described herself as a "believer in a Universal

Christianity” (*BC* 9:119).<sup>45</sup> As she expressed her convictions in a letter to her sister Henrietta dated 23 January 1847, “there are Christians in every body of men who call on Christ . . . while the purest Christianity may probably be on the outside of all” (*BC* 14:105). By analyzing the subtle adaptation of higher critical findings in *A Drama of Exile*, I aim to show that this poem, like EBB’s comments about her own Christianity, undoes dichotomies of heterodox/orthodox and inside/outside.

Just as EBB’s doctrinal views eschew tidy ecclesiastical categories, so also her response to the higher criticism resists classification. Her correspondence demonstrates the complexity of her engagement with this criticism. On the one hand, she had a few choice words about David Friedrich Strauss, whose controversial *Das Leben Jesu (Life of Jesus)* (1835; trans. 1846) portrayed Jesus as human (not as Christ) and discredited accounts of prophecies and miracles—in an 1851 letter, she denounced “that villainous Strauss,” deeming his work “dull & wicked together” (*BC* 17: 5). On the other hand, her description of the Bible as “a worthy *myth*” advances distinctly Straussian terms of analysis and evokes the study of comparative religion that, as explained in my introduction, developed in conjunction with the higher criticism (*BC* 10: 135). As Charles LaPorte demonstrates, the ostensible resistance to the higher criticism in some of EBB’s letters stands in tension with the higher critical principles evident in her own poetry, which he discusses in relation to François René Auguste de Chateaubriand’s “articulation of Christianity as a fundamentally poetical religion” in *Le Génie du Christianisme (The*

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<sup>45</sup> EBB’s concept of a “Universal Christianity” ultimately led to reservations about the doctrine of hell (as expressed in *BC* 19:282). These remarks invite comparison between her “Universal Christianity” and the beliefs of contemporaries such as Anne Brontë, whose poem “A Word to the ‘Elect’” (1846) argues universal redemption; F. D. Maurice, who was dismissed in 1853 from his position at King’s College for questioning traditional teachings about hell; and, of course, George MacDonald, whose radical ideas about salvation led to his dismissal from his Congregationalist post in 1853.

*Genius of Christianity*) (1802) (*Victorian Poets* 23-24). While LaPorte's illuminating study does not consider the particular case of *A Drama of Exile*, I examine this poem in light of different yet related studies by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biblical critics.

Chief among these studies are Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, widely disseminated in Britain from its English translation in 1787, and Johann Gottfried Herder's *Vom Geist der Erbräischer Poesie* (*On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*) (1782-83; trans. 1833).<sup>46</sup> These studies broke new ground in their attention to biblical poetry's parallel form, as well as in their efforts to historically contextualize this poetry. Discussing the legacy of Lowth and Herder, Stephen Prickett explains that these biblical scholars contributed to "the breakdown of older, typological models of exegesis": instead of "a timeless compendium of divinely inspired revelation," the Bible became understood as "a work of literature within the context of ancient Hebrew life" (*Words and the Word* 105). Both Lowth and Herder focused on the opening chapters of Genesis and the poetic dialogues in Job as particularly excellent elements of this literature. Lowth remarked that biblical poetry is animated by the tropes of "the Chaos and the Creation," which are first advanced in the opening chapter of Genesis (1:87). He similarly privileged Job, the final book examined in his lectures, by deeming it "single and unparalleled in the Sacred Volume" and discussing its "sublimity of style" (2: 347, 431). Herder's subsequent study concurred about Job's sublimity and explicitly connected this book to the opening chapters of Genesis, claiming that the imagery from the natural world in Job

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<sup>46</sup> Lowth's lectures were originally delivered in Latin in 1747 and published in 1753 as *De sacra poesie Hebraeorum*. Stephen Prickett's and David Norton's studies both identify the extensively annotated 1787 translation as highly influential on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers (Prickett, *Words and the Word* 41-43; Norton 218-29). Herder's reception has received attention by Günter Arnold, Kurt Kloocke, and Ernest A Menze, who observe that while a variety of notable British intellectuals such as Matthew Arnold expressed esteem for Herder, he was best known among transcendentalist circles in England and the United States (406).

provides the reader with “the eyes to perceive and contemplate the works of creation”—in other words, with a powerful perceptual awakening or renewal (1:95).

Although EBB does not mention reading Herder in her letters, she was, at the very least, familiar with Lowth through his *Select Psalms in Verse* (1811) and through Chateaubraind’s references to *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, her own biblical study emphasized the very poetic passages prized by Lowth and Herder. Already adept in Greek, EBB began teaching herself Hebrew in 1832, reading the Old Testament with the aid of a grammar and lexicon.<sup>48</sup> In a letter dated 9 June of that year, she outlined her plan of study to H. S. Boyd, her friend and scholarly mentor, as follows: “I have been reading thro’ the first eight chapters of Genesis in Hebrew, & after I have read the whole of that book, I mean to begin Job” (*BC* 3: 25). By the time she began composing *A Drama of Exile*, EBB referred to having “read the entire Bible from Genesis to Malachi right through,” though this statement obscures the fact that her reading schedule departed from the Old Testament’s canonical ordering in order to privilege its poetry (*BC* 8: 118). Moreover, EBB expressed ambitions to put her skills as translator and exegete to creative uses early in her course of study: in November of 1832, she told Boyd that she hoped to write a “poetical version of the Psalms” by the next spring (*BC* 3: 62). While no evidence remains of her attempting this project, her own poetry indicates knowledge of and appreciation for the formal patterning of biblical texts.

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<sup>47</sup> EBB referred to reading “Lowth’s version” of the Psalms in a letter to Boyd dated 19 November 1846 (*BC* 14: 44). I say “at the very least” because the fact that EBB’s letters do not mention *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* or *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* does not foreclose the possibility that she read them, particularly given the breadth and depth of her interest in biblical poetry.

<sup>48</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of EBB’s study of Hebrew, see Scheinberg (67-76). See also Anthony J. Elia’s detailed analysis of EBB’s biblical theology (8-20).

Within *A Drama of Exile*, EBB's portrayal of postlapsarian life evokes what Herder described as some of the primary features of the Book of Job's poetry. Remarking on the divine speeches of chapters 38-41, Herder claimed that even as this survey of creation explores "the world of monsters"—that is, the fierce creatures Behemoth (chapter 40:15-24) and Leviathan (chapter 41)—it remains "full of natural feeling, full of the universal providence and goodness of God in his wide empire" (1: 77-78). EBB similarly combines wildness and providence in her poem's depictions of the cosmos. While this combination becomes most evident in the representation of the Earth spirits midway through the drama, it emerges first in the opening dialogue between the fallen angel Lucifer and the gatekeeper Gabriel, just outside of Eden. This exchange initiates the poem's work of questioning the distinction between fallen and unfallen states:

*Luc:*                           Get thee to thy Heaven,  
  And leave my earth to me.

*Gab:*                           Through Heaven and earth  
  God's will moves freely, and I follow it  
  As colour follows light. He overflows  
  The firmamental walls with deity (ll. 112-16)

Whereas Lucifer's possessive pronouns and end-stopped imperatives emphatically sunder heaven from earth, Gabriel's enjambments gather them as common places of divine activity. His speech puts heaven and earth on the same line, following this unpunctuated combination with a spondaic foot ("God's will") that emphasizes divine omnipresence. The placement of "overflows" intensifies this fullness, distancing the verb from its object and so accelerating the reader's progression toward the following line. With their subtle play on the separation of the waters from the firmament as described in Genesis 1:6-7, these lines emphasize that the Creator exceeds the boundaries of creation. This plenitude

clarifies Gabriel's previous simile about his obedience to the divine will: "I follow it / As colour follows light" (ll. 114-15). Just as light includes all colours, so also God's will encompasses Gabriel's movement. In *A Drama of Exile*, heaven and earth are less containers of divine activity than they are contained by divine activity—and thus EBB's poem invites a perceptual shift akin to what Herder identified as the renewed contemplation of "the works of creation" achieved by the Book of Job's poetry (1: 95).

### **From Prophecy's Vision to Wisdom's Song**

At the same time that *A Drama of Exile* participates in the higher critical recovery of biblical poetry, it also departs from the model of poet as prophet, a model prevalent in nineteenth-century British literature. As Prickett observes, Lowth's lectures served not only "to redefine the notion of Hebrew poetry" but also "to redefine the notion of 'poetry' itself as the natural expression of prophetic utterance" (*Words and the Word* 41). Indeed, David Norton points out that Lowth reiterated and amplified the main arguments of *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* in his *Isaiah*, a translation and commentary published in 1778 (229). To be sure, EBB's use of the prophetic voice has often been noted. Surveying the poet's reception during the 1840s–60s, Alethea Hayter observed in her 1962 study that EBB's detractors and admirers alike frequently characterized her as a prophetess (154). More recent scholarship on EBB continues to highlight her adaptation of the Carlylean model of the poet as prophet, particularly as this model is articulated in Carlyle's lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840).<sup>49</sup> This criticism has evaluated EBB's place within the tradition of

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<sup>49</sup> See the respective arguments of Margaret Reynolds (16), Linda M. Lewis (188), Elizabeth Woodworth (543), and Beverly Taylor (235). Among EBB's wide-ranging oeuvre, poems that draw most overtly on the poet as prophet tradition include "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus" (1838), "A Vision of Poets" (1844),

Victorian sage writing derived from Carlyle and theorized in the respective studies of John Holloway and George P. Landow. To participate in these discussions, I consider the extent to which EBB's recourse to biblical wisdom texts in *A Drama of Exile* shapes a distinctive literary genre and an alternative mode of authority.

My analysis of this alternative mode of authority in *A Drama of Exile* develops ideas advanced in Stone's analysis of EBB's *Aurora Leigh* (1857), which argues that in this verse novel EBB "transforms the sage tradition through her gynocentric adaptation of its characteristic strategies and her subversion of the authoritative stance so strenuously asserted by Victorian prophets like Carlyle" (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 138). As she highlights EBB's feminist revisions, Stone identifies both points of continuity with and notable differences from the typical Victorian sage. Intensifying some of Stone's claims, Dieleman distances EBB still further from this tradition, aligning both *Aurora Leigh* and EBB's other poetry with the "dialogic and democratic" figure of the Congregationalist preacher, whose office depended on support from the entire congregation, women included (49-50).<sup>50</sup> Responding to both Stone and Dieleman, I suggest that EBB's own commentary on Carlyle provides a useful lens for examining her revisions to Victorian sage discourse and offers another framework for analyzing her poetry's dialogism.

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and *Aurora Leigh* (1857). Her poems "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1847) and "A Curse for a Nation" (1856), both published in the American abolitionist annual the *Liberty Bell*, feature imprecatory speakers that call to mind the denunciatory mode of the Jeremiad, a subgenre of the prophetic tradition.

<sup>50</sup> Dieleman emphasizes EBB's participation in Congregationalist gatherings during her youth and argues that Congregationalism's emphasis on the verbal dimensions of worship and its valuation of scripture continued to influence EBB in her adult life (23-24). She further notes that Congregationalists "did not explicitly exclude women" from preaching, observing that in the United States a woman named Antoinette Brown was ordained as a Congregationalist minister in 1853, even though the practice of women preaching had by this time ceased in England (23-24, 50).

Although the work was not attributed to her upon the initial publication of Horne's *A New Spirit of the Age*, EBB made substantial contributions to this volume's essay on Carlyle. Making direct references to *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), *The French Revolution* (1837), and *Past and Present* (1843), this essay emphasizes that Carlyle should be recognized not as a historian but as a poet: "No poet yearns more earnestly to make the inner life shine out, than does Carlyle," EBB writes. "No poet regrets more sorrowfully, with a look across the crowded and crushing intellects of this world—that the dust rising up from men's energies should have blinded them to the brightness of their instincts" (*BC* 8: 355).<sup>51</sup> Privileging affect rather than logic, EBB extols Carlyle's writings for a passionate sincerity that she aligns with poetry. Her specific emphasis on mourning and unfulfilled longing anticipates her assertions in the preface to her own 1844 volume that pleasure is not "the final cause of poetry" and that her poems are the product of serious work—work, of course, being one of Carlyle's most insistent themes (*WEBB* 2: 570).<sup>52</sup>

Given the terms with which EBB praised Carlyle, his response to the copy of *Poems* (1844) that she sent to him as "a tribute of admiration & respect" (*BC* 9:99) appears distinctly ironic. According to a letter that EBB sent to her friend Mary Russell Mitford, he wrote to her to declare that "a person of [EBB's] 'insight & veracity' ought to use 'Speech' rather than 'Song' in these days of crisis" (*BC* 9: 122). She told her friend

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<sup>51</sup> The appendix to volume 8 of Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson's *The Brownings' Correspondence* reprints the essay on Carlyle in full, indicating EBB's contributions in sans serif typeface (353-59).

<sup>52</sup> Carlyle's frequent theme of work received brief consideration in my introduction, in relation to both "Characteristics" (1831) and *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34). As implied by her references to sorrow, EBB herself was no stranger to mourning. She experienced a bronchial illness that kept her bedridden from 1838 to 1841 and lost two of her brothers (Sam and Edward) in 1840.

that she appreciated his “cordial kindness” in reading and praising her work, but a subsequent letter to her suitor Robert reveals that she found Carlyle’s words surprising. In this letter, EBB marvelled that Carlyle, “a poet unaware himself,” would “think of putting away, even for a season, the poetry of the world” (BC 10: 80). She recounted Carlyle’s words in his letter to her that “this perverse and froward generation” should “work and not sing,” a statement that evokes the denunciatory tones of Deuteronomy 32:20 (“And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end *shall* be, for they *are* a very froward generation, children in whom *is* no faith”). Undoing Carlyle’s sharp distinctions, she insisted, “song is work, and also the condition of work” (BC 10: 81). By investing “song” with gravity, she claimed poetry as serious, socially responsible literature. Furthermore, her diction aligns with a recurring motif throughout *A Drama of Exile*: that is, the idea that wisdom can be found through attentive listening. As will be analyzed in the following pages, the dramatic poem’s many speakers achieve insight through a gradual and collective process; moreover, both the Eden spirits and the angel choruses suggest to Adam and Eve that they might learn to perceive the presence of divinity amid the sounds of the newly fallen world.

*A Drama of Exile* heightens its lyric musicality through its creative adaptation of the Romantic form of the closet drama, as exemplified in Lord Byron’s *Manfred* (1817) and *Cain* (1821). EBB further complicates her poem’s generic features and its place within the English literary tradition by repeatedly referring to it as a “masque,” comparing it not to Byron’s works but to Milton’s *Comus* (1634) (BC 8: 84, 117, 263, 267). *A Drama of Exile* was never performed, nor is there evidence that EBB intended it to be privately staged; nevertheless, the category of the masque is fitting insofar as it

signals a dramatic form based not on plot but on arrested movement.<sup>53</sup> EBB's concern is not with novelty of action but with novelty of interpretation. As subsequent pages will show, her adaptations of the masque's typical elements of dialogue, spectacle, and song thicken the poem's exegetical and artistic work. Ultimately, her preference for what Carlyle called "Song" as opposed to "Speech" is not reducible to favouring poetry over prose (*BC* 9:122). Rather, EBB's multivocal and even fragmentary form allows her work to advance a *poetics* in Ricoeur's sense of the term—that is, language that "aims at redescribing reality by the twisting pathway of heuristic fiction," as explained in my introduction ("Biblical Hermeneutics" 88). Ricoeur's distinction between poetics and rhetoric, speech that "aims at persuading men by providing to discourse pleasing ornaments" ("Biblical Hermeneutics" 88), then, offers a means of redefining and clarifying EBB's revisions to Carlyle's argumentative mode of sage discourse.

By representing the process of achieving wisdom as an act of listening, EBB departs from what both Holloway and Landow identify as a distinctive feature of prophetic sage discourse: the frequent reliance on visual metaphors to express authority (Holloway 296; Landow 51). The pattern observed in these studies on the Victorian sage reflects the intellectual habit of isolating and privileging sight that Louise Vinge traces to classical antiquity: Vinge observes that Aristotle's *De Sensu* orders sight as the first and most important of all senses, while Philo similarly extols the sense of sight as "the source of knowledge and wisdom" because it is "next to mind" (18, 25). EBB's movement from the visual to the acoustic, then, reinforces her revisions to the sage's authorial

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<sup>53</sup> See also Donald S. Hair's discussion of how EBB repurposes the masque's courtly function of complimenting a nobleman. Hair argues that, despite their sin, Adam and Eve are "the complimented" insofar as they are reminded "not just of what they have lost but of how much they retain" (99).

positioning. In effect, these revisions reprise the distinctions succinctly expressed in the Book of Proverbs: “The way of a fool *is* right in his own eyes, but he that hearkeneth unto council *is* wise” (12:15). For EBB, sages distinguish themselves not by virtue of their superior vision but through their discernment in finding and listening to harmony.

EBB further renegotiates the formal and thematic issues established by her literary precursors through her innovative concept of exile. Anticipating that *A Drama of Exile* would be compared with *Paradise Lost* and found wanting—as indeed it was by both *The Atlas* and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*—she distinguishes her poem from Milton’s by foregrounding its setting:

I had promised my own prudence to shut close the gates of Eden between Milton and myself, so that none might say I dared to walk in his footsteps. He should be within, I thought, with his Adam and Eve unfallen or falling, - and I, without, with my EXILES, - *I* also an exile! (*WEBB 2: 567-68*)

In addition to revealing EBB’s consciousness of her place as a woman writer on the margins of a literary tradition dominated by men, this statement advances what Scheinberg calls “a complex use of the figure of exile” (71).<sup>54</sup> Within a biblical context, EBB’s language evokes the expulsion of humankind from Eden, as well as Israel’s exile in Babylon. Furthermore, EBB’s Christian framework invites comparison with the use of exilic terms by New Testament writers to describe a faith position: for instance, the epistle to the Hebrews identifies the patriarchs from Abraham through the prophets—with the notable inclusions of Abraham’s wife Sarah, and, still more radically, Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho—as “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (11:13). This expanded use

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<sup>54</sup> Although beyond the scope of this chapter, an intriguing comparison point to EBB’s use of exile can be found in Grace Aguilar’s “The Wanderers” (composed in 1838 and published in *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* in October 1845). See Daniel A. Harris’s discussion of Aguilar’s innovative representation of exile in her portrayal of Hagar (145-47).

of exile accords with EBB's remark that her title signals also "that other mystical exile of the Divine Being"—that is, Christ's incarnation (*BC* 8:267). Insofar as it encompasses everything from the fall of Lucifer to the divine *kenosis*, EBB's capacious concept of exile brings together loss and hope within the postlapsarian world. Her exilic scene, then, becomes at once a site of pain, redemption, and expectation: her dramatic speakers together search for wisdom in ways that remain productively unresolved.

### **Forming *A Drama of Exile*: Fragmented Sources and Interpretive Dialogue**

Without directly questioning the seven-day creation account of Genesis chapter 1, EBB's pre-Darwinian reinterpretation of biblical texts accords with the higher criticism's approach to the Bible as a composite, fragmentary, and literary document.<sup>55</sup> EBB's earlier poem "The Earth and its Praisers" (1838), by contrast, addresses geological questions much more explicitly. As LaPorte observes, this poem's description of the earth as "six thousand winters" old signals its "conservative ideology": it aligns not with the findings of Charles Lyell in the 1830s but with the older calendar of Bishop James Ussher, according to which God created the Earth in 4004 BCE (*Victorian Poets* 31). In its exploration of the biblical fall mythology, *A Drama of Exile* largely sidesteps scientific debates about the origins of the earth and its creatures. Nevertheless, its textual variety aligns with important higher critical findings.

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<sup>55</sup> As the respective work of LaPorte and Larsen highlights, the rise of evolutionary theory has received much more attention in scholarship on Victorian literature and religion than has the rise of biblical criticism, even though the latter developments made an equal if not greater impact among Protestant believers (LaPorte "Victorian Literature" 280; Larsen *Contested Christianity* 43). *A Drama of Exile* was published the same year as Robert Chambers's controversial bestseller *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), which offered a broadly deistic account of life's evolutionary progress.

In particular, the source criticism that began with the respective studies of Jean Astruc and Alexander Geddes in the late eighteenth century drew attention to the plurality of oral and written traditions that comprise the Pentateuch. On the basis of differing lexical styles and differing names for God, this criticism distinguished, for instance, between the first creation account (Genesis 1:2-2:3), which uses “Elohim,” and the second creation and fall narratives (Genesis 2:4-3:24), which use “Yahweh.” Later studies extended the principles of source criticism and applied them to books beyond the Pentateuch, Job included.<sup>56</sup> Even though Herder’s earlier study misidentified Job as “the most ancient” of biblical texts (1: 19), Herder acknowledged the stylistic differences between this book’s frame story—where God grants a figure presented as “the Adversary” permission to test the righteous man Job to his limits—and its central dramatic poem, where Job, his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu, as well as God himself, participate in an unruly debate about the meaning of suffering (1: 110-11). By the end of the Victorian period, biblical criticism had revised and extended this analysis considerably: the 1889 commentary by the Anglican minister Thomas Kelly Cheyne, for example, dated the poem as belonging to the exilic or post-exilic periods and identified the prologue, the epilogue, the interpolated hymn to wisdom in chapter 28, and the speeches of Elihu as late additions (41-47, 71-74, 84). Twenty-first century biblical scholarship further highlights these qualities, including Carol A. Newsom’s examination of Job as a “polyphonic text” (23), a study that adapts Mikhail Bakhtin’s work to theorize this book’s refusal to privilege a single authorial voice and its resistance to closure.

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<sup>56</sup> Hypotheses about these sources were developed throughout the century, most famously in the respective work of Hermann Hupfeld and Julius Wellhausen. For a useful overview of developments in biblical source criticism from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, see Richard Hess (32-50).

These dialogical models of interpretation find important precedents in nineteenth-century biblical criticism. For instance, Herder structured *On The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* as a dialogue between two speakers, the fictitious orientalist Alciphron and Euthyphron. He highlighted the reciprocal and flexible qualities of the dialogue form, remarking, “Here two individuals speak, and whoever will, may listen, improve what they have to say, and be either teacher or learner” (1: 21). The prolific theologian and scholar Friedrich Schleiermacher further drew attention to dialogue’s unique capacity to catalyze the search for knowledge, wisdom, and meaning. Schleiermacher’s esteem for this model becomes clear in his *Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato* (1804; trans. 1836), a volume that EBB herself had in her possession sometime after her marriage to Robert Browning in 1846. Marginal pencil strokes in this book, now held at the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University, underscore specific passages pertaining to Schleiermacher’s discussion of Plato’s objectives and methods.<sup>57</sup> Even though it is impossible to determine the identity of the hand in question and even though these markings certainly post-date the composition of *A Drama of Exile*, they nevertheless show evidence of thoughtful engagement with nineteenth-century hermeneutics. Marked passages include Schleiermacher’s identification of “the consciousness of ignorance” as the necessary starting point for the pursuit of wisdom, as well as his assertion that embarking on this quest requires “that the final object of the investigation not be directly enunciated . . . but that the mind be reduced to the necessity of seeking and put into the way by which it may find it” (5, 17). Schleiermacher thus conceptualizes dialogue as arising out of an

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<sup>57</sup> F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato*, translated by William Dobson (London: John William Parker, 1836). This volume is currently held in the Brownings’ Library collections of the Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University (Waco, TX).

awareness of the limits of one's own knowledge, a concept that Hans-Georg Gadamer further develops in his engagement with Schleiermacher's hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* (1960). Distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic dialogue, Gadamer claims, "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view but being transformed in a communication in which we do not remain what we were" (371). For Gadamer, then, dialogue consists not of argument but of intellectual and ethical transformation. A similarly transformative model sustains EBB's *A Drama of Exile*, as the poem's human, earthly, angelic, and divine voices together work attentively, yet not conclusively, toward harmony and hope.

Both the poetic form and the composition history of *A Drama of Exile* call attention to a similarly incremental and shared process. Although some of EBB's letters present the poem's development in terms reminiscent of the Romantic idea of the inspired, individual genius, closer examination shows that the poem developed gradually and as the product of consultation. Corresponding with Boyd on 12 December 1843, EBB described the poem tentatively entitled "The First Day of Exile" as a subject that had "siezed [sic] on [her] and wd. not let [her] go until [she] wrote on it"; a few weeks later, she used similar language in a letter to Horne (*BC* 8: 83, 8: 17). More than two years prior to this time, however, EBB had written to her friend Mary Russell Mitford that she had been "haunted for a long while" by a poem provisionally entitled "*A day from Eden*" (*BC* 5: 146). This letter appears to refer to a manuscript entitled "Adam's Farewell to Eden in His Age," published for the first time in volume 20 (1997) of *Studies in Browning in His Circle* (7-16) and more recently included in the fifth volume of *The*

*Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, released by Pickering and Chatto in 2010 (592-98). Although cast as a dramatic monologue, “Adam’s Farewell to Eden in His Age” evinces some of the anaphoric patterns, trochaic rhythms, and variant refrains that EBB later developed in the songs of the Eden and Earth spirits throughout *A Drama of Exile*.

The extensive editorial advice that EBB received from her cousin John Kenyon during the latter stages of *A Drama of Exile*’s composition further militates against the notion of the individual genius. As she recounted to Boyd on 22 March 1844, not long after her initial “exultation & boldness of composition” she fell into despair about the poem and would have burned her manuscript had it not been for her cousin’s intervention (BC 8: 267). Unpublished and undated letters from Kenyon to EBB further reveal Kenyon’s hand in shaping the poem. These letters, currently held at the Armstrong Browning Library, contain both encouragement and critique. At the same time as Kenyon assured his cousin of his admiration for the poem, he questioned her archaic diction choices and made suggests substantive edits regarding characterization.<sup>58</sup> For her part, EBB thanked Kenyon for his “unspeakable kindness to me and the poems,” going so far as to say of the two-volume *Poems* (1844), “isn’t it ‘our book?’” (BC 9: 51).

This epistolary exchange underscores the dynamism of EBB’s composition and revision practices. Her poetic reinterpretation developed incrementally, as becomes apparent when one compares the autograph manuscript of *A Drama of Exile* held at the Armstrong Browning Library and the published versions of this poem.<sup>59</sup> Cumulatively,

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<sup>58</sup> See John Kenyon to EBB, n.d., Criticism on EBB’s *A Drama of Exile*. L0128.1, Browning Collections, Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University. See also John Kenyon to EBB, n.d. [1844], Criticism on EBB’s *Poems* (1844). L0128.2, Browning Collections, Armstrong Browning Library.

<sup>59</sup> EBB, *A Drama of Exile*, 1844, MS D0216, Browning Collections, Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University. All subsequent references to this manuscript are cited parenthetically by page numbers.

the changes that EBB made between this manuscript and the text as published in 1844 heighten the poem's work of blurring distinctions between the unfallen and fallen worlds. She thereby intensifies the images of divine plenitude evident in the opening conversation between Lucifer and Gabriel, as further dialogues continue to develop this primal scene. Furthermore, after the poem's serialization in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* and its reprinting in *Poems* (1844), EBB continued to revise *A Drama of Exile* for republication in her 1850, 1853, and 1856 collections, adding an opening soliloquy by Lucifer. These revisions suggest EBB's ongoing efforts to improve her poetry, as well as the inexhaustibility of her work of reinterpretation.

EBB reflects on both the ambition and the limitations of this poem in her preface to *Poems* (1844), where she introduces *A Drama of Exile* as "the longest and most important work" that she "ever trusted into the current of publication" but nevertheless admits to deciding to publish it only after "considerable hesitation and doubt" (*WEBB* 2: 567). This widely reviewed volume, published a few months later in the United States as *A Drama of Exile: and Other Poems* (1845), had the effect of making "Elizabeth Barrett Barrett' England's most internationally recognized poet," as Stone observes ("Lyric Tipplers" 123); however, this recognition was not due to the lead poem. *A Drama of Exile* was not unilaterally disliked: for instance, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* praised it as "one of the most beautiful poems which our day has produced" (*BC* 9: 319), and *The League* deemed its choruses "worthy of the highest prize of ancient tragedy" (*BC* 9: 379). Nevertheless, reviewers from *The Atlas*, the *John Bull*, the *Sun*, the *Examiner*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the *Critic*, and the *Westminster Review* all dismissed it as an inferior piece, preferring EBB's sonnets and

other shorter poems.<sup>60</sup> On 4 November 1844, after the release of most reviews, EBB wrote rather self-deprecatingly to her friend and fellow poet Thomas Westwood, “I assure you I have no vain puffings up about the Drama of Exile - & I can easily believe that, as a whole, it may be a failure” (BC 9:217). Nevertheless, her continued revisions to this poem imply that her disillusionment coexisted with ongoing hopes for this piece. If *A Drama of Exile* is indeed a “failure,” as EBB suggested to Westwood, then it is a grandly ambitious one: it calls into question both the possibility and the desirability of closure.

### **Clashing Cosmologies in *A Drama of Exile*: Genesis, Job, and the Earth in Exile**

As *A Drama of Exile* unfolds, EBB reinterprets the biblical fall narrative by drawing from a variety of biblical texts that together display the formal and theological plurality of the biblical canon—the very plurality that was brought into sharp relief as a result of the higher criticism. A comparison of differences between the manuscript and the published poem shows the gradual development of EBB’s innovative engagement with these texts. This innovation becomes clear in the first conversation between Adam and Eve, as well as in the chorus of Eden spirits that precedes this dialogue and accompanies humankind’s departure from Paradise. When Adam and Eve speak for the first time, the manuscript compares the angelic songs that they hear in the wilderness to a “healing rain” (25). Conversely, the text as published in 1844 and onwards, likens this music to a “watering dew” (l. 533), a simile that brings Edenic imagery into the wilderness (cf. Genesis 2:6). Similarly, Eve’s wondering response to Adam’s statements that he would rather be cast out with her than alone in Paradise evolves from “is it but a

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<sup>60</sup> These reviews are reprinted in full in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, vol. 9., pp. 319-80.

dream of thee I hear?" (22) to "Where is loss? / Am I in Eden?" (ll. 487-88). These changes accord with the alterations that EBB made to the refrain of the Eden chorus: while the manuscript emphasizes what the spirits of the trees, rivers, birds, and flowers alike shall no longer "give" (12-16) to Adam and Eve, the published text repositions subject and object to call attention to what Adam and Eve "shall hear nevermore" (ll. 302, 328, 354, 389), emphasizing not the diminishment of creation's majesty but the hardening of humankind's perception.

This perceptual hardening, however, stands in tension with the hopeful possibilities evoked in the Eden chorus' kinesthetic and synesthetic language. As the spirits of the trees, rivers, birds, and flowers bid farewell in turn to the two humans, they all declare that every "footstep" of the departing pair "Treads out" a song or fragrance from paradise (ll. 299-300, 327-28, 351-52, 386-87). This phrase is rich in polysemy, as Donald S. Hair observes: "'Treads out' can mean to obliterate, but it can also mean that the rhythm of the footsteps retains the rhythm of the murmur" (96). By making Adam and Eve's footsteps the locus of this rhythm, the spirits suggest that music from paradise reverberates in corporeal motion. *A Drama of Exile* thus resists a tidy mind/body dualism, at the same time that it underscores the interconnectivity of embodied sensations. EBB's quartet of tree, river, bird, and flower spirits calls to mind the elements of earth, water, air, and fire, which, in classical accounts, were aligned with the faculties of touch (of which taste was considered an extension), sight, hearing, and smell, respectively. EBB

both recalls this classical patterning and complicates this schema in the lines of the Eden spirits, which emphasize a fully corporeal, immersive listening.<sup>61</sup>

Sung at the threshold of Paradise, the songs of the Eden spirits begin with an exhortation to attentive listening that echoes the words used in Proverbs 8 to describe personified Wisdom, who calls out at the gates of the city, “hearken unto me, O ye children” (8:32). The Eden chorus cries, “Harken, oh harken! let your souls behind you / Turn, gently moved! / Our voices feel along the dread to find you / O lost, beloved” (ll. 227-30). By following the motion of the soul with embodied language that is both auditory and tactile, the spirits present the heeding of this call as a kinesthetic, synesthetic process that joins spiritual and somatic action.

In addition to this joining of body and soul, the songs of the Eden spirits create a bridge between heaven and earth. This bridging occurs in the spirits’ description of the “divine impulsion” (l. 285) in their midst:

Dropt, and lifted, dropt, and lifted  
In the sunlight greenly sifted, –  
In the sunlight and the moonlight  
Greenly sifted through the trees (ll. 287-90)

Insofar as the adverb “greenly” modifies the action of the sunlight and moonlight, these enchanting lines combine visual and tactile experiences in ways that prepare for the subsequent synesthetic description of “a ruffling of green branches / Shaded off to

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<sup>61</sup> See Louise Vinge’s discussion of classical traditions of sensation, as well as the recovery of these traditions by Romantic writers. Herder, for instance, advanced a theory of sensory unity in his *Über den Ursprung der Sprache* (*On the Origin of Language*, published in 1770) (166). On other uses of classical traditions in *A Drama of Exile*, see Dieleman’s discussion of EBB’s use of the signs of the zodiac, signs that trace their roots not only to medieval Christianity but also to classical astrology (89-90).

resonances” (ll. 294-95). These lines offer yet another instance where variations in diction between manuscript and published text indicate the gradual refinement of EBB’s concepts. In place of “shaded off,” the manuscript has “riffing into” (12), a phrase that emphasizes motion but lacks the sensory combination of colour and sound that appears in the published text. The incantatory cadence of these tetrameter lines heightens the contrast between the blank iambic pentameter speeches of the human characters and the songs of the Eden spirits, with their varied, intricate play of rhythm and rhyme.

Remarking the chorus’ resistance to metrical classification, Hair suggests that its range evokes “the exuberant variety of the divine creator” (95). In my view, this variety not only betokens divine exuberance but also assigns to the natural world a wildness that resists human attempts to contain it. *A Drama of Exile* thereby advances a cosmological patterning akin to what Ricoeur identifies in the divine speeches of the Book of Job: “inscrutable order, measure beyond measure, terrifying beauty” (*The Symbolism* 321).

Within EBB’s poem, these paradoxical combinations find their most intense expression in the cries of the two Earth spirits who confront Adam and Eve in the wilderness. These spirits turn what begins as a sorrowful lamentation into a series of threatening denunciations. The first spirit’s mournful exclamations over the loss of paradisiacal splendor amid “deep waters, cataract and flood” as well as “mountain-summits, where the angels stood” (ll. 1099, 1101) give way to forceful, even predatory assertions of power: the spirit declares to Adam and Eve, “Alp and torrent shall inherit / Your significance of will” (ll. 1529-30). Furthermore, the two spirits’ anaphoric catalogue of natural wonders and wild creatures from “storm-wind” to “owlet” employs

patterns of repetition and images that recall the series of questions with which God rebukes Job (ll. 706-18; cf. Job 38:4-25).

As the drama continues, the Earth spirits are joined by a series of voices in the wind that, in turn, echo the Book of Ecclesiastes. The sheer range of these voices, which include “infant voices,” “poet voices,” “philosophic voices,” “revel voices,” and “love voices,” calls to mind the survey of human wisdom, folly, pleasure, toil, friendship, and riches undertaken by this book’s central speaker, Qohelet.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the voices’ insistent wondering whether all be “in vain” evokes Qohelet’s refrain “all *is* vanity,” extensively considering this prospect and never conclusively denying it (ll. 1591, 1603, 1615, 1639, 1669, 1681, 1689; cf. Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14, 2:1, 11, 17). In this instance, as in the images derived from Job, EBB evokes biblical wisdom literature to underscore human finitude.

While EBB and the Job poet alike use nature’s untamable power to interrogate the idea that humankind is the pinnacle of creation, *A Drama of Exile* lets the earth and animal spirits speak for themselves. Subverting the rule that humans exert through language, the spirits declare, “Your bold speeches, our Behemoth / With his thunderous jaw shall wield” (ll. 1539-40). This pointed allusion to the description of the Behemoth in Job 40:15-24 evokes the beast’s physical strength and amplifies the assertion in the biblical text that the Behemoth “drinketh up a river, *and* hasteth not” (40:23). *A Drama of Exile* thus portrays this creature as master of the logocentric order by which humankind

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<sup>62</sup> Following the conventions of most twentieth and twenty-first century biblical scholars, I refer to the speaker of the Book of Ecclesiastes as “Qohelet,” rather than “the Preacher” (as the Authorized Version renders it). Biblical critics from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first centuries have observed that the Hebrew word *Qohelet* is difficult to render in English, but the resemblance to the Hebrew root *q-h-l* (gather, flock) has led commentators to emphasize the context of speaking in the assembly (see Alter, *The Wisdom Books* 337).

attempts to exert dominion over the natural world, as in Adam's act of naming the animals in the second creation narrative (cf. Genesis 2:19). In representing the Behemoth as an emissary of the Earth spirits, EBB's interpretation of Job 40 accords with Herder's understanding of these creatures as primarily natural beings, rather than spiritual figures. Departing from the allegorical tradition of reading Behemoth and Leviathan as Satan and the Anti-Christ, Herder discussed these creatures as physical animals, likening them to the hippopotamus or elephant and claiming that the very name *behemoth* derives from an Egyptian term (1: 106-7).<sup>63</sup> At the same time, an element of the older allegorical tradition seems to survive in EBB's poem: the Earth spirits are goaded by curses directed toward humankind by none other than Lucifer.

Lucifer's role in *A Drama of Exile* is telling of both the poem's Romantic revisionism and the ways that EBB reframes the concepts of sin and fallenness. As Stone observes, this portrayal of Lucifer is a complex one that responds both to Milton's *Paradise Lost* and to Byron's *Cain* (1821): even as EBB figures Lucifer as fallen and mistaken, she also "humanizes him in an unorthodox and innovative manner," particularly in her sympathetic representation of him as the former Morning Star (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 83). This intriguing blend of judgement and sympathy becomes evident in the exchange between Lucifer and Adam that prefaces the arrival of the Earth spirits. Countering Adam's repeated assertions of God's transcendent holiness and Lucifer's irrevocable fallenness, the erstwhile Morning Star offers a heated retort:

Ha, my clay-king!

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<sup>63</sup> As Susan Schreiner explains, this allegorical tradition found its roots in Gregory the Great's influential *Moralia in Job* (595 AD) and remained the dominant interpretation until the writings of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century (49-72). The category of *allegory*, as both an artistic and interpretive mode, will become a subject of discussion in chapter 2.

Thou wilt not rule by wisdom very long  
 The after generations. Earth, methinks,  
 Will disinherit thy philosophy  
 For a new doctrine suited to thine heirs  
 And class these present dogmas with the rest  
 Of the old-world traditions, Eden fruits  
 And Saurian fossils. (ll. 731-38)

In what is one of the very few references in all of EBB's poetry to developments in paleontology, Lucifer asserts that Adam's theological views are rapidly becoming antiquarian—they are going the way of the dinosaur. While *A Drama of Exile* does not entirely support Lucifer's position, its dynamism and dialogism ultimately resist any fixed dogmatic claim. Moreover, subsequent scenes in the dramatic poem continue to challenge rigid concepts of fallenness: both the Earth spirits and, later, Eve contest Adam's philosophy in ways that subtly develop and revise Lucifer's statements.

*A Drama of Exile* thus shows that to blur the distinction between prelapsarian and postlapsarian states is necessarily to provoke questions about the meaning of suffering and thus to raise the issue of theodicy. If, as EBB's Adam tells Eve when first attempting to assuage her trepidation about the spirits they encounter in the wilderness, "the circle of God's life / Contains all life beside" (ll. 909-10), then this circle must somehow encompass destructive forces. It is on this issue that the Book of Job and the opening chapters of Genesis converge. As Pamela Norris observes, the "conundrum posed by Job," namely, "what is the point of misfortune and evil?" is essentially the same as the question provoked by the biblical fall narrative: "in a perfect world, what was the purpose of the forbidden fruit?" (267). EBB's reinterpretation sees the primal fall as, if not quite a *felix culpa* in the traditions of St. Ambrose or St. Augustine, then, at the very least, a promising one. Elsewhere in the drama, Adam and Eve imply that their enduring love for

each other makes the fallen world almost as if it were unfallen: Eve marvels, “Where is loss? / Am I in Eden?” (ll. 478-88), and Adam declares, “Because with *her*, I stand / Upright, as far as can be in this fall” (ll. 489-90). In bringing together standing and falling, EBB tempers the disjunctive formulation of Raphael in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, who emphasizes that angelic beings “stand or fall” by their own choice (5.540) and likewise admonishes Adam that “to stand or fall” lies within his own power (8.640). The Lucifer of *A Drama of Exile* emphatically challenges this model when he suggests, “Is it not possible, by sin and grief / (To give the things your names) that spirits should rise / Instead of falling?” (ll. 726-28). While it might be going too far to claim that EBB is “of the devil’s party without knowing it,” as William Blake famously said about Milton (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 65), she clearly questions simplistic understandings of fallenness. For EBB, transgression may be educative: as Eve puts it, she has been “schooled by sin to more humility” (l. 1178)—a statement that finds in the fall a transformative effect.

### **Taking Tradition to Task: Eve’s Role in *A Drama of Exile***

By reconsidering the fall for both its curses and its blessings, *A Drama of Exile* interrogates Christian exegetical and literary traditions that associate Eve with sin. EBB emphasized her poem’s response to these readings when she reflected in a letter to Horne shortly prior to the poem’s publication, “*first in the transgression* has been said over & over again, because of the tradition,—but *first & deepest in the sorrow*, nobody seems to have said” (*BC* 8: 117).<sup>64</sup> Even though EBB construed herself as alone in a struggle

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<sup>64</sup> The biblical precedent for this interpretation appears in 1 Timothy 2:13-14: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”

against the patriarchs of literary history—in another, often-cited letter, she claimed, “I look everywhere for Grandmothers & see none” (*BC* 10: 14)—we might today, thanks to the interventions of feminist scholars, identify several potential “grandmothers” in the preceding centuries, from Julian of Norwich to Aemilia Lanyer.<sup>65</sup> Within the nineteenth century alone, EBB appears to have had, if not grandmothers, then some rather daring older sisters. Such women include the historian Lucy Aikin, whose *Epistles on Women* (1810) offered a feminist rewriting of western culture from Eve to the eighteenth century, and the Owenite socialist Eliza Sharples, who in 1832 gave an address celebrating Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit: “Well done, woman! LIBERTY FOR EVER” (qtd. in Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* 146).

Held up against such radical feminism, *A Drama of Exile* seems remarkably mild: indeed, there are moments when EBB’s Eve seems as condemning of her sin as Tertullian or Augustine.<sup>66</sup> Feminist readers may well cringe at the initial exchange between Adam and Eve, in which Eve prostrates herself before Adam and implores, “Strike, my lord! / I also, after tempting, writhe on the ground” (ll. 435-36). Figuring woman as temptress, this serpentine description evokes Lilith, Adam’s first wife according to Talmudic legend: Lilith appears as a snake-like and alluring *femme fatal* in John Keats’s “Lamia” (1819), for instance, as well as in later works by Victorian writers and artists.<sup>67</sup> This

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<sup>65</sup> Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) offers a fascinating precursor and point of comparison with EBB’s revisionary work in *A Drama of Exile*. Terence Allan Hoagwood argues that EBB “goes further” than Lanyer’s wife of Pontius Pilate in denying Eve’s exclusive guilt for the fall (166).

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, the statements about Eve made by Tertullian in the opening to “The Apparel of Women,” where Eve is spoken about as “the cause of the fall of the human race” (117), as well as Augustine’s claims claim that the “disease” of mortality “was brought in through a woman’s corrupted soul” in *Of Christian Doctrine*, Book 1 Chapter 14 (628).

<sup>67</sup> For example, MacDonald’s second fairy tale for adults, *Lilith* (1895), represents the title character as a demonic and dangerous seductress. My second chapter considers both the possibilities and limitations of MacDonald’s fairy tale works from a feminist perspective, though primarily with respect to his earlier fairy

imagery underscores both the weight and the complexity of the patriarchal tradition that EBB sought not merely to invert but, rather, to engage productively. Her reinterpretation of Eve puts her in the company of other nineteenth-century Christian women poets, including Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Adelaide Procter, and Emily Hickey, who similarly challenged misogynistic master narratives by adopting the voices and perspectives of various biblical women, as F. Elizabeth Gray's *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (2009) analyzes in detail. Gray highlights many poetic representations of the Virgin Mary as the New Eve, as well as Mary Magdalene (85-107); however, EBB's focus on the opening chapters of Genesis appears to have had fewer precedents among nineteenth-century British women poets and to have influenced the later poetry of Christian Rossetti, as Anthony H. Harrison has argued (127-34). *A Drama of Exile* subtly counters misogynistic interpretations of the biblical fall narrative, without discarding male-dominated exegetical and literary history altogether. Ultimately, EBB renders Eve both a penitential figure and an insightful one.

Her nuanced and laboured engagement with patriarchal exegesis becomes all the more evident when one examines her composition process: the manuscript of *A Drama of Exile* includes two variants of the initial conversation between Adam and Eve that reveal her gradual discarding of the traditional serpentine comparison between Eve and her tempter. In one variant, the hypocatstasis of the lines quoted above appears as an explicit, if clumsy, simile: "I writhe here likest what I tempted like" (20). In the other, Eve goes so far as to ask Adam to apply the curse that God offers the serpent in

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tale *Phantastes* (1858). Notable Victorian visual representations of Lilith include Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1873) and John Collier's *Lilith* (1887).

Genesis—that the woman’s seed shall “bruise [the serpent’s] head” (3:14)—to herself, crying, “Bruise my head,” and repeating, “My head lies at thy foot, my serpent head” (19). Subsequent lines in both the manuscript and the published text, however, show EBB’s departure from this reading. In the manuscript, Eve follows her self-abasing statement with a more confident assertion: “since I was the first in the transgression, with my little foot / I will be the first to tread from this sword-glare / Into the outer darkness of the waste” (25). Marginal commentary by EBB indicates her lingering dissatisfaction with these lines, as the following notation in her own hand appears in pencil at the bottom of the page: “I do not like ‘little’—it is almost coquettish—with my firm foot?” (25). The line in the poem as published in 1844 reads “with a steady foot,” a revision that both sustains the speech’s iambic metre and emphasizes Eve’s strength (l. 547).

By depicting Eve as the first to venture out into the wilderness, *A Drama of Exile* at once counters misogynistic readings of the fall narrative and emphasizes the shared position of man and woman in relation to the rest of the universe. Moreover, EBB’s poetic exploration of Eve’s place as “*first & deepest in the sorrow*” (BC 8: 117) does not define Eve’s anguish solely—or even primarily—in terms of the curse offered in Genesis 3:16, “in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children.” Beyond the labour of childbirth, Eve does the work of seeking restoration with the newly fallen world. This work is initiated by her responses to the Earth spirits and solemnized in the blessing that Adam gives to Eve later in the poem, following Christ’s instructions. Adam extols the many “lofty uses” and “noble ends” to which Eve will “aspire” (ll. 1829-31), including “comforting for ill, and teaching good / And reconciling all that ill and good / Unto the patience of a constant hope” (ll. 1845-47). By claiming for herself “this high part / Which lowly shall be

counted,” Eve affirms that the “Noble work” that she will hold “in place of garden-rest” operates from a principle of harmony rather than hierarchy (ll. 1899-1900).

*A Drama of Exile* thus looks beyond the contest of power that the Earth spirits suggest and toward a radical embrace of limitation. In this way, EBB underscores and further develops the sense of human finitude that the higher critics found in the sublime poetry of Job. Lowth, for instance, claimed that this book’s “design” contrasts the “corruption, infirmity, and ignorance of human nature” with the “infinite wisdom and majesty of God” (2: 83). Similarly, Herder argued that, of all biblical texts, the Book of Job “furnishes the clearest proof” of humankind’s “comparative weakness” in relation to God’s “incomprehensible power” (1: 52). Both Lowth and Herder, then, drew attention to the diminishment of the human subject in the divine speeches, which, in their emphasis on the unfathomed mysteries of the natural world, question the paradigm of human dominion advanced in the first and second creation narratives.<sup>68</sup>

EBB similarly questions anthropocentric models of the cosmos: Eve responds to Adam’s assertions of dominion by emphasizing the continuity between all forms of life. Even as the Earth spirits threaten to crush humankind under their scorn, Adam declares, “we may be overcome by God / But not by these” (ll. 1549-50). Eve’s rejoinder “By God, perhaps, in these” (ll. 1551) questions the separation that Adam presumes. EBB thus reworks what may be, for feminist critics, one of the most vexing lines in all of *Paradise Lost*: “He for God only, she for God in him” (4.297). In *A Drama of Exile*, Eve’s statement emphasizes EBB’s theology of immanence: whereas Adam separates God and

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<sup>68</sup> The ecological implications of the Book of Job’s alternative cosmology have recently been explored by Kathryn Schifferdecker, who argues that the divine speeches offer “a view of creation—and of humanity’s place in creation—that is fundamentally different from any other theology of creation in the Bible” (2).

the Earth spirits, Eve finds continuity between the divine presence and the forces of nature. Moreover, in response to Adam's classification of the Earth spirits as "Inferior creatures" (l. 1163), Eve admonishes, "Let us not stand high / Upon the wrong we did to reach disdain" (ll. 1175-76). In effect, she flattens Adam's hierarchical language by not only recalling the fall but also, in the lines that follow, making sorrow the means of restoring their relationship with the earth. Eve beseeches the Earth spirits, "let my tears fall thick / As watering dews of Eden, unreproached" (l. 1220-21) and "let some tender peace, made of our pain, / Grow up betwixt us, as a tree might grow" (ll. 1307-9). These statements position Eve's sorrow—figured through her tears—as making possible a renewal that is based in an organic connection between human and nonhuman life.

Eve proceeds both to intensify the dynamic qualities of her suffering and to give it roots, as she emphasizes the transformative qualities of her humility:

And I am prescient by the very hope  
 And promise set upon me, that henceforth  
 Only my gentleness shall make me great,  
 My humbleness exalt me. (ll. 1273-79)

By making limitation the grounds of aspiration, Eve figures herself as falling into hope. Calling attention to the significance of the "lyric female subject" position occupied by Eve, Wörn argues that EBB's Eve "is infused with selfless, perfect love, imaging the attributes of the divine" (39). Indeed, this reclamation of humility puts Eve in the position of the self-sacrificing Christ who appears later in the drama.<sup>69</sup> The first to respond to

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<sup>69</sup> EBB further develops the alignment between Eve and Christ in her later poetry. In the final book of her verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1857), she incorporates a version of Eve's lines and applies them specifically to Christ: referring to the ethics advanced by Jesus in the gospels, Aurora states, "My humbleness, said One, has made me great" (*WEBB*: 3, ll. 9.879).

Christ's proclamation of "the Love, which is [himself]" (l. 1820), Eve immerses herself in this love by declaring that, regardless of any blessing given specifically to her, she is "blessed in harkening" to him (l. 1822). Moreover, the paradoxical concept of work later articulated by Christ recalls Eve's acceptance and reclamation of her postlapsarian position. Exhorting Adam and Eve to live, love, and work "nobly, because lowly" (l. 1996), Christ echoes Eve's previous statement that she will accept her own work as a "high part, which lowly shall be counted" (l. 1898). Both Eve and Christ, then, dismantle hierarchies of high and low as they advance a wider vision of greatness.

EBB's association of these two figures contributes to a longstanding religious tradition of feminizing Christ. Julie Melnyk observes that this tradition, which has its origins in medieval thought, experienced a resurgence with the rise of Evangelicalism in eighteenth and nineteenth-century British Christianity, especially in the religious writings of Low Church Victorian women. Melnyk concludes that, even though this portrayal of Christ allowed women "to claim spiritual and moral authority as representatives of a new order," its "indissoluble connection between Christ's power and his suffering undercut any attempt to turn spiritual authority into secular power" (122). Yet whereas this reading conceptualizes suffering as the result of oppression, *A Drama of Exile* invites an understanding of suffering as the product of an all-encompassing gesture of love. As the poem continues, EBB shows that the acceptance of limitation exemplified by Eve has a powerful theological counterpart, not only in the willing descent of God the Son but also in the very act of creation by God the Father.

### **From Humility to Hope: Kenotic Emptying and Creative Self-Limitation**

*A Drama of Exile* introduces its theology of self-limitation through an innovative turn, bringing “*a vision of CHRIST*” into the wilderness (*WEBB* 1: 56). Occurring at the moment when the Earth spirits reach the height of their ferocity, this appearance both recalls and repositions the theophany in the Book of Job, when God appears out of the whirlwind in chapter 38. While the divine speeches of this book employ sublime descriptions of nature that foreground the Creator’s ineffable otherness, EBB’s Christ restores harmony between humankind and nature in ways that emphasize divine immanence. At first glance, Christ’s rebuke of the Earth spirits appears to re-inscribe the androcentric dominion of the Genesis creation accounts: he subdues the Earth spirits and enjoins them, “Receive man’s sceptre” (l. 1798). This model of kingship, however, undergoes a metamorphosis in subsequent lines: Christ closes his rebuke by dignifying the Earth spirits’ service (ll. 1815-20) and then models such servitude himself.

In a striking reversal of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ transfiguration into glory before Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1-13; cf. Luke 9:26-38), EBB describes Christ as “*gradually transfigured*” into “*humanity and suffering*” (*WEBB* 1: 60). She thereby recalls the Pauline hymn on Jesus’ humility, which lauds the one who “made himself of no reputation, and took [on] . . . the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man: and being found in fashion as a man . . . humbled himself, and became obedient to death, even the death of a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8). What the Authorized Version renders as “made himself of no reputation” appears in the Greek text as ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν (*heaton ekenosen*), literally “emptied himself,” a phrase that EBB appears to

have seized on.<sup>70</sup> In a letter to Mitford written shortly after the publication of *A Drama of Exile*, she alluded to “that ‘emptying’ of the Saviour’s soul from Deity, which is a scriptural doctrine,” noting emphatically, “it is said that *He emptied Himself*” (BC 9: 101). She thus highlights the magnitude of this *kenosis*: more than a demotion of stature, it is a forceful corporeal action.

EBB’s emphasis on Christ’s willing acceptance of limitation accords with some of the Christological models developed in response to the higher criticism’s portrait of Jesus as human. Broadly speaking, nineteenth-century Britain witnessed a theological shift that the historian Boyd Hilton describes as the transition from the Age of Atonement to the Age of Incarnation. While the focus of Hilton’s study is evangelicalism, he shows that this shift extended across denominational lines, drawing from James Martineau’s writings on F. D. Maurice, whom Martineau credits with initiating this shift (5-6). More particularly, EBB’s use of the Pauline hymn anticipates the kenotic Christology advanced by German theologians, beginning with Gottfried Thomasius in his *Christi Person und Werk* (*The Person and Work of Christ*) (1845) and developed by Wolfgang Friedrich Gess closer to the end of the century. Replacing the Lutheran account of Christ’s self-emptying as pertaining only to his human nature, the kenotic theologians argued for a limitation of Christ’s divinity as well. They thereby sought to “harmonize the Old Christological dogma with the modern picture of the life of Jesus in his modern humanity,” as Wolfhart Pannenburg explains (310). Just as these theologians bridged

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<sup>70</sup> See *The Greek New Testament*, edited by Kurt Aland et al., 3rd ed. (United Bible Societies, 1983); see also William F. Arndt and Wilbur F. Gringich (428).

theology and anthropology through an expanded understanding of *kenosis*, so EBB makes the act of self-limitation radiate throughout the entire universe.

Her allusion to the hymn on Christ's humility further develops the various strands of biblical wisdom literature woven throughout *A Drama of Exile*. As Ben Witherington observes, the "servant song" of Philippians 2 adapts the hymns of praise to personified Wisdom in texts such as Proverbs 8. This passage finds yet another precedent in the description of the suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, especially in the portrait of this servant as one who "hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (53:3-4), as Witherington notes (259-60). By figuring Christ as suffering servant, EBB engages with and particularizes the longstanding typological reading of Job as prefiguring Christ.<sup>71</sup> Her recourse to Philippians 2 and, by extension, Isaiah 53, accords with Ricoeur's reading of the Book of Job. Ricoeur aligns Job with the figure of the suffering servant, whom he identifies broadly as possibly "a historical personage, individual or collective" or possibly "the figure of a Saviour to come" (*The Symbolism* 325). As Ricoeur explains, this figure has the potential "to make of suffering, of the evil that is undergone, an *action* capable of redeeming the evil that is committed" (*The Symbolism* 324). For Ricoeur, the suffering servant exhibits a radical selflessness—and this selflessness explains why Job, an imperfect type of this figure, must repent at the end of the book. As Ricoeur sees it, the divine speeches prompt Job to surrender both "the demand for retribution" and "the claim

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<sup>71</sup> Richard S. Hess explains that, whereas early rabbinic traditions offered "a view of Job as the model of a righteous Gentile," Christian theologians from Augustine and Gregory the Great onwards have identified Job as "prefiguring of the suffering of Christ" (402). In its nuanced typology, *A Drama of Exile* aligns with the pattern that Scheinberg identifies in the later *Aurora Leigh*, where EBB's innovative use of typological elements "critiques the conventions of typical Christian typological practice" that, according to Scheinberg, subordinate Hebraic and female identity to Christian and male identity (86). As Scheinberg's analysis shows, EBB participates in Christianity's appropriation and subordination of Jewish traditions but demonstrates more nuanced appreciation for Jewish traditions than many of her contemporaries.

to form by oneself a little island of meaning in the universe” (321). In this repentance, then, Job models the soul’s growth from a false sense of privilege to a humbled participation in a vast cosmos that far exceeds any one individual.

Within *A Drama of Exile*, Adam and Eve undergo a similar process: Christ’s suffering servitude becomes the paradigm for their own spiritual development. Christ declares that he will “tread earth” and that the “tears of [his] clean soul” will “set a holy passion to work clear / Absolute consecration” (ll. 1971, 1976). Eve’s affirmation “We worship in thy sorrow, Saviour Christ” (l. 1926) further emphasizes the continuity between divine and human suffering. To be sure, EBB’s commitment to Christology, informed though it is by the higher criticism, stands at some remove from the demythologized paradigm later advocated by Ludwig Feuerbach, who claimed in *Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity)* (1846) that “love makes God man and man God” (61).<sup>72</sup> Yet while it would be going too far to equate EBB’s portrait of the man of sorrows with Feuerbach’s claims about the divinity of suffering for others, *A Drama of Exile* appears broadly in agreement with Blake’s radical statement “God becomes as we are that we may be as he is” (“Appendix to the Prophetic Books” 426). EBB extends this redemptive work throughout all creation: her Christ assigns a cosmological significance to his suffering when he lists the reasons for his coming to earth: “For all the world in all its elements, / For all the creatures of earth, air, and sea, / For all men in the body and in the soul” (ll. 1963-65).

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<sup>72</sup> Feuerbach’s work was translated into English by Mary Anne Evans, who later became better known as the novelist George Eliot, in 1854. Eliot’s work as both a translator of the higher criticism and a creative practitioner of these interpretive methods will become the main subject of my third chapter.

*A Drama of Exile* intensifies this cosmic interconnectivity when the Earth spirits speak again toward the close of the poem. Addressing Adam and Eve, these spirits declare, “our God’s refracted blessing in our blessing shall be given” (l. 2029). This assertion not only claims the Creator as the God of human and nonhuman life alike but also recalls the Eden spirits’ hailing of “divine impulsion” in their midst (l. 285). Moreover, their reference to this blessing as “refracted” suggests not only mediation but also potential distortion, thereby evoking the concept of creation as divine self-limitation that Jürgen Moltmann highlights as finding expression in select Christian theologians, beginning with the work of Nicholas of Cusa in the fifteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Moltmann further traces this model to the Jewish concept of *shekinah*, the indwelling presence of God that remains with his people even into exile. As Moltmann sees it, this concept effectively diffuses the problem of evil by portraying God as one who does not “rule the world like an autocrat or dictator” but rather “waits and awaits” (142-49).<sup>74</sup> *A Drama of Exile* similarly depicts the divine presence as growing and changing with all creation.

### **“Listen Down the Heart of Things”: Harkening to Wisdom’s Tears**

As the poem builds toward its final lines, EBB continues to develop her theology of immanence by foregrounding this active state of waiting. Her exilic scene is a place of

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<sup>73</sup> Without naming the concept of *shekinah*, Wörn speculates that EBB’s own “desire for the experience of God incarnate in this world” was informed by “the lack of dualism in Hebraic thought” (238). Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantic literature, especially in Germany, was influenced by the kabbalistic mysticism of Isaac Luria, the sixteenth-century religious teacher. See Nurbhai and Newton on the recovery and appropriation of Luria’s ideas (34-36); see also Nehama Aschkenasy’s discussion of kabbalistic mysticism, *shekinah*, and the development of Jewish ideas about the feminine aspect of God (16).

<sup>74</sup> Moltmann explains this concept of waiting by evoking the process theology developed in the twentieth century by Charles Hartshorne, which, in turn, built on the earlier philosophical work of Alfred North Whitehead (149). The roots of this school of thought can be further traced to the early nineteenth century, in the Romantic concept of pantheism developed by K. F. Krause (1781-1832), a student of Fichte and Hegel. In contradistinction to pantheism, panentheism maintains not that everything *is* God but that God is *in* everything (see Hartshorne 167-69).

expectation wherein joy and sorrow coexist. Even as the Earth spirits echo the seven-day structure and refrain of the creation story in Genesis 1, declaring that “the evening and the morning / Shall re-organise in beauty / A sabbath day of sabbath joy” (ll. 2012-14), they acknowledge the “melancholy” of the world’s present, mortal state (l. 2015). Within this sadness, the Earth spirits anticipate renewal: they will “leap up in God’s sunning / To join the spheric company” (ll. 2048-49). By putting this expectation into the mouths of the Earth spirits, EBB evokes the Pauline idea that “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth” while awaiting redemption (Romans 8:22). Her attention to the mutual suffering of all creation intensifies the poem’s revisions to Genesis 1-2, replacing dominion with interconnectivity.

Heightening the pathos of this expectation, the chorus of invisible angels—the very last voices to speak in the poem—echoes the words of the Eden spirits in the earlier scene. Drawing attention to these echoes, Herbert Tucker correlates the “melancholia” of the Eden spirits’ statement “In all your music, our pathetic minor / Your ears shall cross” (ll. 255-56) with the transfigured sorrow expressed in the angel chorus’ drawing Adam and Eve “into the full chant divine,” where “the human in the minor / Makes the harmony diviner” (l. 2082, 2084-85). As Tucker explains, these lines exemplify the role of the “diminutive”—that is, the elements of aphoristic concision that can be found within EBB’s otherwise exuberant and sprawling poetry—in providing a “fit register at once of experiential loss and of visionary promise” (545). At the same time that the Eden spirits and angel chorus underscore Adam and Eve’s smallness, they raise the prospect that fallen humankind might perceive and participate in a harmony that exceeds them.

By culminating with a call to hear and respond to the music of both the heavens and the earth, *A Drama of Exile* offers a reflection on human finitude akin to that found in the Book of Job, yet one that foregrounds divine indwelling more than divine alterity. This distinction is facilitated by EBB's insistently sonic language, which offers a striking reversal of the visual metaphors employed throughout the Book of Job. As Susan Schreiner notes in her commentary on this book, "the question of what Job knew is continually expressed in visual allusions denoting insight, wisdom, or understanding" (19). Whereas Job responds to the theophany of chapters 38-41 by saying to God, "My ears have heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (42:5), EBB represents the experience of revelation differently: for all the spectacle afforded by the masque form, the appeal of *A Drama of Exile* is ultimately not to the eyes but to the ears. This acoustic energy intensifies the dramatic poem's emphasis not on pronouncing a transcendent, definitive vision of God's authority but on heeding the voices of all creation.

Fittingly, *A Drama of Exile* culminates with a call to hear and respond to the music of both the heavens and the earth. Its initial exhortation to "harken," as the Eden spirits put it (l. 227), reaches a crescendo in the repeated command of the angel chorus: "Listen to our loving" (ll. 2068, 2100, 2114, 2127). This chorus urges, "Listen, through man's ignorances, / Listen, through God's mysteries, / Listen, down the heart of things" (ll. 2068). By presenting this act as occurring in the absence of clarity and knowledge, EBB embraces epistemic limitation at the same time that she makes this limitation the source of an indefinable wonder. In lines added to the poem as published in 1850, EBB further intensifies this pattern: "Listen, man, through life and death, / Through the dust

and through the breath, / Listen down the heart of things” (ll. 2187-89).<sup>75</sup> Gathering together life, death, dust, and breath, the chorus implies that attentive ears can discern, in creation’s many voices, the sounds of an ongoing divine revelation.

These echoes demonstrate EBB’s subtle adaptation of biblical poetry’s parallel patterning, which was brought into sharp relief as a result of the studies by Lowth and Herder. Although Lowth’s account of parallelism as occurring when poets “express the same thing in different words, or different things in a similar form of words” emphasized similarity (1: 68-69), Herder drew attention to parallelism’s capacity to intensify meaning. Herder observed that parallel lines “strengthen, heighten, empower each other,” an observation that Robert Alter cites as a useful corrective to the widespread misconception of parallelism as based merely in synonyms (qtd. in Alter *The Art of Biblical Poetry* 11). Herder’s remarks thus anticipate Alter’s more fully developed analysis of the “narrative impulse” evident in the poetry of the prophetic and wisdom books, an analysis that builds on Alter’s earlier work on biblical narrative (*The Art of Biblical Poetry* 28-29). As Alter demonstrates, the repetitive techniques of biblical writers and editors “produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning,” where “meaning, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature, was conceived as a process requiring continual revision” (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* 12). Similar patterns of development underlie *A Drama of Exile*: its many voices echo, amplify, or even invert the words of other speakers in ways that not only revise the biblical and literary texts with which the poem engages but, ultimately, put *A Drama of Exile* in dialogue with itself.

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<sup>75</sup> See the editorial note to the text as it appears in *WEBB* 1: 68.

Accordingly, the poem concludes not with closure but with continuation and unresolved contradictions. After all speech has passed into silence, EBB's stage directions outline the drama's final motions, images, and sounds as follows: "*The stars shine on brightly while ADAM and EVE pursue their way into the far wilderness. There is a sound through the silence, as of the falling tears of an angel*" (WEBB 3: 71). Exactly how this extravagant scene would be staged remains unclear, as Edgar Allen Poe highlighted in an incisive review: "How there can be sound during silence, and how an audience are to distinguish, by such sound, angel tears from any other species of tears, it may be as well, perhaps, not too particularly to inquire (BC 10: 350)."<sup>76</sup> Strange though EBB's terms seem, they nevertheless evoke the drama's animating motif of tears, including those of the Eden spirits (ll. 248-50), Eve (ll. 1220-21), and Christ (l. 1976). Through this image (or, as EBB's stage directions would have it, this sound), the closing scene assembles the cosmos, holding forth the promise of renewal yet reminding readers that this renewal remains unrealized. Even as it fails—quite spectacularly—to provide a definitive answer to the issues it raises about the ordering of the cosmos and the meaning of suffering, *A Drama of Exile* opens new interpretive possibilities for the biblical fall mythology. These possibilities favour plurality over unity, continuity over separation, and questions over answers, as the fragmentary and dialogic form of EBB's poem enacts its own sustained meditation on the art of falling short.

The very irresolution of *A Drama of Exile*, then, reveals its work of forming wisdom. The poem's revisionary engagement with biblical wisdom literature conveys

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<sup>76</sup> Edgar Allan Poe's review of *A Drama of Exile and Other Poems* originally appeared in *The Broadway Journal* (4 January 1845). It is reprinted in BC 10: 349-57.

EBB's appreciation for the poetic qualities of the Christian scripture, as well as her conviction that "the *poetry of Christianity* will one day be developed greatly and nobly" (*BC* 7: 21). A particularly compelling expression of this idea, one that hearkens back to *A Drama of Exile*, appears in a letter EBB sent to her sister Arabella on 29 June 1861, only a few weeks before her own death: "I do believe in the development of all vital truth, & that Christianity was not planted as a dead stick, but as a grain of mustard seed to grow & enlarge & thrust out branches" (*The Letters* 2: 541). These words recall the wish voiced by EBB's Eve that peace might grow between humankind and the earth "as a tree might grow / With boughs on both sides" (ll. 1308-9), at the same time that they evoke the Gospel parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-21). The organic imagery figures the created order not as static but as continually emergent, making its growth analogous to the intellectual and spiritual pursuit of what EBB calls "all vital truth." As earlier letters show, she conceptualized this truth as something not held by any particular religious institution and as distinctly multiple in its manifestations. Writing in early January 1844, she explained her ecumenical concept of a "Universal Church of Christ" in terms that bring together unity and plurality: while she called this body "one & indivisible," she went on to emphasize that "the *churches* of Christ are *many*—and the ministrations of the one spirit are *many*—and the aspects of Truth to the human mind are many indeed" (*BC* 8: 149). This affirmation of a variety of religious forms and practices underpins EBB's own expression of Christianity, which incorporated higher critical insights into the literary qualities of biblical texts, without becoming threatened by the higher criticism's challenge to literalist interpretations of sacred stories.

In her ecumenical Christianity, EBB shares much in common with George MacDonald, the subject of my next chapter.<sup>77</sup> Like EBB, MacDonald emerged from a Congregational Christian context but expressed substantial reservations with any particular denominational affiliation; as will be explained, he received substantial criticism for his liberal and literary theology. Furthermore, both EBB and MacDonald distinguished themselves from their non-conformist Protestant contemporaries through their receptiveness to German biblical scholarship, with which they engaged both critically and creatively in their letters and published writings. As chapter 2 will show, MacDonald intensifies the dialogical energy that is evident in EBB's adaptation of forms derived from biblical wisdom literature. His own use of wisdom literature goes further than *A Drama of Exile* in its radical openness not only to questioning but also to a form of productive doubt. For MacDonald, recognizing the limits of knowledge becomes the starting point for a radical inner transformation. Where EBB reconfigures the authorial stance of the paradigmatic Victorian sage, focusing not on projecting a singular transcendent vision but on attending to a plurality of voices, MacDonald continues this trajectory by turning self-reflexively toward the reader's interpretive work.

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<sup>77</sup> These two writers may never have met in person, given that EBB lived primarily in Florence following her marriage in 1846. However, MacDonald wrote a detailed and favourable review of Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "Christmas-Eve" (1850) for the *Monthly Christian Spectator*, as will be discussed in chapter 2. It appears extremely likely, then, that MacDonald would have been familiar with EBB's poetry, which was generally better known and regarded than her husband's during the mid-nineteenth century, though I have not been able to find direct references to her work in MacDonald's writings or to find any letters exchanged between EBB and MacDonald.

## Chapter 2: Wisdom's Footsteps: Wandering Paths and Wondering Aphorisms in George MacDonald's *Phantastes*

Although George MacDonald's writings have, since the nineteenth century, circulated in distinctly Christian contexts, his work remains difficult to classify along denominational lines. MacDonald contributed to the ecumenical periodical *Good Words* throughout the 1860s and edited *Good Words for the Young* from November 1869 to September 1872, though the influence of F. D. Maurice had led him to join the Church of England in 1860.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, his literary career began after he resigned from the pastorate of a Congregational Church in Arundel (1851–53): the deacons charged him with heresy because of his reservations with the doctrine of hell, his speculations that animals might enter heaven, and his receptiveness to German scholarship.<sup>79</sup> His *Unspoken Sermons* (1867, 1885, and 1889), a series of spiritual reflections never delivered from the pulpit, display at once his sustained commitment to the discourse of preaching and his readiness to question dogmatic claims. Much as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile* adapts the Book of Job's poetic dialogues to awaken new ways of perceiving the postlapsarian world, so also MacDonald's sermon on "The Voice

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<sup>78</sup> Founded by Norman McLeod and published by Alexander Strahan, *Good Words* featured material from a range of writers yet had a distinctly "evangelical orientation," as Mark Knight observes (*Good Words* 79). MacDonald's children's stories *At the Back of the North Wind* (1869-70) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1870-71) both appeared in this periodical, formerly edited by McLeod. For a discussion of Maurice's influence on MacDonald, see Martin Dubois (577, 580-81).

<sup>79</sup> The exact reasons for MacDonald's dismissal have been interpreted in various ways. Stephen Prickett uses the phrase "tainted with German thought" in the context of MacDonald's engagement with Romantic literature ("The Idea of Tradition" 10), while C. S. Lewis says somewhat more precisely "tainted with German theology" (Introduction 7). While Shelley King and John B. Pierce interpret the situation surrounding MacDonald's dismissal as pertaining explicitly to "the new critical studies suggesting that the Bible was better understood as a composite historical document" (11), Timothy Larsen distances MacDonald from these developments in biblical scholarship (*George MacDonald* 95-97). My own discussion of MacDonald's response to the higher criticism focuses on what is evident in his letters, essays, and other writings.

of Job” (1885) reconsiders the experience of religious revelation. In addition to valorizing Job’s capacity to doubt as indicative of productive struggle, MacDonald emphasizes that the theophany of chapters 38-41 appeals not to the “logical faculty” of the “intellect” but “to the revealing, God-like imagination” (235). This Romantic distinction between reason and imagination, with its implicit alignment of wisdom with the latter, accords with the wonder and creativity that distinguishes his own didactic voice.

MacDonald’s concept of creative wisdom underpins *Phantastes* (1858), a densely allusive story about the education of the imagination and the first of two fairy tales that MacDonald wrote for an adult audience.<sup>80</sup> Published in October 1858 by Smith, Elder, and Company, *Phantastes* participates in the *bildungsroman* tradition of German Romanticism at the same time that it revises the medieval chivalric quest narrative.<sup>81</sup> MacDonald foregrounds this dense intertextuality through the aphoristic epigraphs that preface each chapter, quotations that range from Edmund Spenser to Percy Bysshe Shelley to Friedrich Schleiermacher. These aphorisms underscore MacDonald’s intensive, self-reflexive engagement with the task of interpretation. *Phantastes* follows its first-person narrator, Anodos, into fairyland: over a series of many loosely connected episodes, he attempts to win his ideal lady, defeat the darkness within himself, and gain the honour of knighthood. At the heart of the story, he discovers a library in the fairy palace, where he reads a tale that foreshadows the courage and generosity that he

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<sup>80</sup> Following the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I spell *fairy tale* as two separate words, unless the words are functioning as a compound adjective, in which case they are hyphenated. I have similarly adopted the *OED*’s spelling *fairyland*, except when quoting MacDonald, who often writes *Fairy Land*.

<sup>81</sup> Earlier in the 1850s, Smith, Elder, and Company had published such various works as John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, several novels by William Makepeace Thackeray, and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). Prior to *Phantastes*, MacDonald had published *Within and Without* (1855), a long dramatic poem, and *Poems* (1857), both with Thomas Norton Longman.

eventually realizes within himself. Like the central character in this interpolated narrative, Anodos comes to relinquish the possessive qualities of his desire and manifest his perfected love through self-sacrifice. Even so, the process by which Anodos interprets this narrative and discerns its moral implications is far from straightforward, remaining unresolved and ongoing at the story's conclusion.

Whereas previous analyses of *Phantastes* tend either to focus on psychoanalytic insights or to trace the story's rich literary genealogy, my approach aims to illuminate MacDonald's own interpretive method.<sup>82</sup> The many acts of reading explored in *Phantastes* anticipate the interpretive practice that MacDonald later articulated in prose, particularly in his essays "The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture" (1867) and "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893).<sup>83</sup> Building on studies that highlight MacDonald's intellectual debt to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I put these writings into dialogue with Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1825) and *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (hereafter, *Confessions*) (1840).<sup>84</sup> I argue that MacDonald's seemingly obscure writings about the right reading of fairy tales participate in consequential debates about biblical higher criticism, particularly as explored by Coleridge. MacDonald follows Coleridge in

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<sup>82</sup> Psychoanalytic criticism on *Phantastes* ranges from Robert Lee Wolff's Freudian reading in *The Golden Key* (40-108) to Bonnie Gaarden's broadly Jungian studies ("George MacDonald's *Phantastes*" 6-14; *The Christian Goddess* 25-30) to William N. Gray's Kristevan reading (pp. 877-93). Studies that situate *Phantastes* within literary history include John Docherty's "The Sources of *Phantastes*" (pp. 38-53) and Prickett's "Fictions and Metafictions," (109-25). The recently published annotated version of *Phantastes*, edited by John Pennington and Roderick McGillis (Winged Lion Press, 2017), foregrounds the story's literary genealogy by including appendices that excerpt literature that influenced MacDonald's story.

<sup>83</sup> "The Imagination: Its Functions and Its Culture" originally appeared in the *British Quarterly Review* in July 1867. "The Fantastic Imagination" was first published as the preface to the American edition of *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Tales* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893). Both essays were later collected in MacDonald's volume *A Dish of Orts* (London: Sampson Low, Martson, & Co., 1893).

<sup>84</sup> These two works by Coleridge were conceived as companion pieces, even though *Confessions* was published only posthumously, by his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge. Studies that draw attention to Coleridge's influence on MacDonald include Gisella Kreglinger's "Reading Scripture in Crisis" (81-87) and Chris Brawley's "The Ideal and the Shadow" (90-95).

reframing the concept of inspiration beyond limiting ideas of divine dictation. In so doing, both Coleridge and MacDonald navigate a middle way between literalist modes of exegesis and the historical methods of the higher criticism.

As they attempt to steer between what they regarded as two extremes, both Coleridge and MacDonald turn to biblical wisdom literature. Coleridge's *Confessions* cites the dialogic poetry of the Book of Job to challenge widely held concepts of inspiration, as explained in my introduction (*Collected Works* 11.1136). His earlier *Aids to Reflection* is similarly "indebted in genre as well as content to the biblical wisdom tradition," as David Lyle Jeffrey puts it (836). Indeed, this volume adapts both the topics and the forms of the Book of Proverbs: it consists of a series of sayings from English theologians, primarily the seventeenth-century thinkers Robert Leighton and Henry Moore, with which Coleridge intertwines his own witty, thoughtful commentary. These sayings, subdivided under the headings "Introductory Aphorisms," "Moral and Religious Aphorisms," and "Aphorisms on Spiritual Religion," range from pithy statements to narrative vignettes. Throughout *Phantastes*, MacDonald similarly adapts aphoristic forms to foreground intertextual dialogue and respond creatively to older wisdom traditions. Whereas EBB's statements in her letters about the ongoing development of "the *poetry of Christianity*" suggest a participatory model of biblical revelation (*BC* 7:21), MacDonald's essays explicitly theorize this participation.

By situating *Phantastes* in relation to higher critical interpretive debates and analyzing the story's connections to biblical wisdom literature, I provide a new context for understanding MacDonald's departure from Scotch Calvinism and embrace of German Romanticism. I thereby respond to recent work by Martin Dubois (2015) and

Mark Knight (2019), which locates MacDonald within and across dynamic theological movements.<sup>85</sup> This work demonstrates both the variety of Victorian religious expressions and the limitations of current critical classifications, thus showing the need for renewed inquiry into MacDonald's literary output. While MacDonald has been largely marginalized in mainstream literary studies, he has received more attention in the context of specifically Christian scholarship.<sup>86</sup> In his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy* (1955), C. S. Lewis champions *Phantastes* as the book that "baptized" his imagination (174), a deeply personal statement that nevertheless invites further examination of MacDonald's own concepts of the imagination and the sacred. Both Daniel Gabelman's *George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairytale Levity* (2013) and Gisela Kreglinger's *Storied Revelations: Parables, Imagination, and George MacDonald's Christian Fiction* (2014) pursue this line of thought, though without focusing specifically on *Phantastes*. Gabelman examines MacDonald's playfulness in light of Christianity's holy fool tradition, whereas Kreglinger considers MacDonald's use of parable in his later writings. My work returns to *Phantastes* to show how the interpretive context of the higher critical debates and the generic category of wisdom writing provide a framework for understanding MacDonald's invitational, even provocative, didacticism.

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<sup>85</sup> Dubois notes affinities between MacDonald and Maurice yet also distinguishes MacDonald from Maurice by virtue of MacDonald's "determined insistence on labouring," which reflects traces of his Calvinist heritage (580). Similarly, Knight's discussion of MacDonald's contributions to *Good Words* demonstrates the challenge of classifying MacDonald's theology. Knight argues that the liberalism that today's scholars tend to associate with the broad church might be more accurately understood in relation to an evangelicalism that embraced "the radical challenge of the gospel" (*Good Words* 80).

<sup>86</sup> Examples include the annual journal *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, which has been housed at St. Norbert College (De Pere, Wisconsin) since 1982. This journal is affiliated with the George MacDonald Society, the membership of which extends beyond academia.

Although MacDonald is the only one of the writers examined in my study who held a formal position within the church, albeit briefly, his letters demonstrate a longstanding hesitation to embrace any single ecclesiastic affiliation. Moreover, his insistent recourse to biblical wisdom literature to explore the vital role of questioning makes him an important figure in my reconsideration of Victorian sage writing, which since the early studies of John Holloway (1953) and George P. Landow (1986) has emphasized prophetic discourse, particularly as adapted by Thomas Carlyle. While Timothy Larsen has recently (2018) identified MacDonald as “a Victorian sage” (*George MacDonald* 123), MacDonald ventures beyond this category in both his authorial voice and his literary forms—from the aphorisms that punctuate *Phantastes* to the Socratic dialogue adapted in his prose writings on the imagination. While Carlyle and MacDonald shared a similar Calvinist heritage, their attempts to renegotiate this heritage differ substantially: as G. K. Chesterton wittily observed (1924), Carlyle retained “a touch of the bully” in his authoritarian temper and thus “could never have said anything so subtle and simple as MacDonald’s saying that God is easy to please but hard to satisfy” (12). Without naming the genre “wisdom literature,” Chesterton highlights the paradoxical force of MacDonald’s aphoristic phrases. Lewis further calls attention to the challenges offered by MacDonald’s seemingly simple words, claiming that his literary art “gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles oldest certainties till all questions are re-opened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives” (Introduction 10-11). As these descriptions suggest, MacDonald’s writing aims less to persuade than to initiate a disquieting process of readerly discovery.

To trace this process, the present chapter coordinates *Phantastes* with MacDonald's discussions of imagination and interpretation in subsequently published essays, as well as in his letters. His story of wayfinding engages playfully and self-consciously with the quest motif signalled in his protagonist's name: derived from Greek, *Anodos* may be translated as either "pathless" or "an upward path," as John Docherty explains (*The Literary Products* 20).<sup>87</sup> When Anodos reaches the end of his journey, he underscores its non-linear qualities and its surprising triumph: "Thus I, who set out to find my Ideal, came back rejoicing that I had lost my Shadow" (195). Read in the context of MacDonald's expansive Christianity, this inversion of finding and losing recalls Jesus' statements about following him: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39). In the absence of a single Christ figure, *Phantastes* shows the protagonist's attempts to become Christlike as a result of his encounters with many incarnations of wisdom. Far from advancing a fixed path to perfection, MacDonald highlights the unending effort to move insight into application.

### **MacDonald's Wisdom Writing and the Limits of Argument**

MacDonald's use of the fairy-tale form to convey his eclectic theology of immanence aligns with his longstanding interest in the Romantic recovery of wonder and mystery as integral to the experience of the divine presence. In 1851, while still in the pastorate at Arundel, MacDonald published a privately printed translation of the *Spiritual Songs* (1802) of Novalis (Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg). Like that of many Romantics, the work of Novalis reacts against enlightenment rationalism by privileging

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<sup>87</sup> Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, the great grand-niece of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, published two volumes of poetry, *Fancy's Following* (1896) and *Fancy's Guerdon* (1897), under the pseudonym "Anodos," though her previous novel, *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* (1893), appeared under her own name.

idealism over materialism and imagination over realism. In the late eighteenth century, writers including Novalis, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, and E. T. A. Hoffman heightened this critique in their use of the fairy-tale form, as Anne Markey observes (68-69). Nineteenth-century Britain was introduced to much of this literature through Carlyle's translations, beginning in the early 1820s and culminating in *German Romance: Specimens of its Chief Authors with Biographical and Critical Notices* (1827).<sup>88</sup> While MacDonald speaks appreciatively of Carlyle in his essay "The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture" (hereafter, "The Imagination"), the distinction between knowledge and wisdom that underpins his writings owes less to Carlyle than to Coleridge. In addition to amplifying Coleridge's theory of the imagination, MacDonald's theory of interpretation responds to *Confessions*.

MacDonald's use of the fairy-tale form thus manifests his thoroughgoing engagement with Romantic traditions. Even though the playfulness of *Phantastes* differs from the gravity sustained throughout EBB's *A Drama of Exile*, both texts draw from Romantic ideas to advance theologically innovative ideas. As discussed in chapter 1, EBB evinces a distinctly Blakean energy in her readiness to question, if not to subvert, authoritative pronouncements. For his part, MacDonald similarly dissolves conventional oppositions between innocence and experience, using a seemingly simple form to address

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<sup>88</sup> Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811; trans. 1818) set the precedent for MacDonald's blend of Romanticism and medievalism; MacDonald himself identified *Undine* as "the most beautiful" fairy tale ("The Fantastic" 313). According to Greville MacDonald's biography, MacDonald praised Carlyle's translation of Hoffman's *The Golden Pot* (1814), which Greville identifies as an important influence on *Phantastes* (297-98). The nineteenth century saw many British adaptations of the fairy-tale genre, including Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), John Ruskin's *The King of the Golden River* (1850), William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* (1854), Dinah Mulock Craik's *The Little Lame Prince* (1875), Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), and Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889) through to *The Grey Fairy Book* (1900).

complex theological issues. Evoking the Romantic concept of the child's intuition, MacDonald emphasizes in "The Fantastic Imagination" that he "[does] not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (317). In the original publication context of this essay, as the preface to the American edition of MacDonald's *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Tales* (1893), this statement applies specifically to the fairy tales ostensibly addressed to children; however, the putatively "adult" fairy tale *Phantastes* similarly praises and appeals to the childlike mind.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, MacDonald's *bildungsroman* suggests that journeying into adulthood requires the recovery of childlike abilities: his protagonist, who celebrates his twenty-first birthday at the story's beginning, reaches full maturation only by setting aside his logical faculties in favour of wonder and intuition.

From the opening pages of *Phantastes*, the collision between rationalism and Romanticism underpins MacDonald's story. Having just come of age, Anodos receives the keys to his deceased father's private writing desk and ventures into the parts of his father's study that had hitherto been "shrouded in a mystery" (2). He speculates, "Perhaps, like a geologist, I was about to turn up to the light some buried strata of the human world" (2).<sup>90</sup> The scientifically minded Anodos is taken aback when he opens his

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<sup>89</sup> MacDonald is not the only Victorian writer whose fairy tales address multiple audiences: so do Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* and Wilde's *A House of Pomegranates*. As Markey argues, troubling the childhood/adulthood distinction was an important part of the Victorian fairy tale's cultural work (82).

<sup>90</sup> MacDonald's reference to geology at the opening of his fairy tale evokes the groundbreaking studies of Charles Lyell, whose *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) showed the earth to be much older than literalist interpretations of the Bible would suggest. These scientific findings, along with Darwin's later works, generated widespread debates about biblical authority that were further compounded by the work of the higher critics. The collectively authored *Essays and Reviews* (1860), for example, focuses primarily on German biblical scholarship yet features references to Darwin in the contributions by Baden Powell and Benjamin Jowett, both of whom were ordained as Anglican clergymen. Like these liberal theologians, MacDonald appears to have been very little troubled by the higher criticism. See Kreglinger's discussion of MacDonald's response to geology as well as to Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Kreglinger notes that MacDonald makes several casual references to Darwin in his later novels ("Reading Scripture" 90).

father's writing desk to be greeted by "a tiny woman-form" who introduces herself as his grandmother and offers to grant him a wish (3).<sup>91</sup> Tellingly, his first response to this fantastic being is based on empirical measurements: "How can such a very little creature as you grant or refuse anything?" (4). Although the woman rebukes Anodos for the "foolish prejudices" that prompt him to correlate authority with size, she concludes that reason or logic would be inadequate to convince him of what he "consider[s] in itself unbelievable" (4). Instead, she shows him the way into fairyland, thus fulfilling a wish that, readers are now told, Anodos had recently voiced while listening to his younger sister read fairy stories aloud. As this incident foreshadows, venturing into fairyland requires Anodos to set aside his empirical biases and cultivate wonder.

Although Anodos describes himself as experiencing "a chronic condition of wonder" that renders him "like a child" throughout his first few adventures in this magical realm, his sojourn soon requires him to confront the forces of disenchantment both from without and from within (24). He receives repeated warnings from the people he encounters that the Alder and Ash tree are destructive forces seeking to entrap and destroy him, but he maintains a cavalier and, indeed, unfounded confidence in his ability to protect himself.<sup>92</sup> The story's main events are set in motion by his discovery of a beautiful marble statue of a woman, whom he sings into life—a clear echoing of the Pygmalion and Galatea story of classical mythology, which MacDonald signals in the chapter's opening epigraph from Thomas Lovell Beddoes's "Pygmalion" (1825), a

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<sup>91</sup> Bonnie Gaarden identifies this fairy as the precursor to Grandmother Irene, who appears in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883) (*The Christian Goddess* 138).

<sup>92</sup> MacDonald's portrayal of the trees in *Phantastes* recall Celtic mythology and folklore, as Pennington and McGillis note in their annotated edition (notes 3 and 16, page 9 and 31). See also Melody Green's discussion of Celtic traditions in MacDonald's fairy tales (9).

retelling of this myth. As Anodos ardently pursues his ideal lady, his judgement further becomes obscured. He is seduced by the maid of the Alder tree, who deceives him in the guise of his sought-after woman, and he only narrowly escapes destruction by the Ash, thanks to the intervention of an unseen and unknown knight. Furthermore, when Anodos discovers the Shadow that haunts him throughout much his time in fairyland, the story presents this darkness not only as a product of his succumbing to the Alder but also as a perceptual deadening to the magic around him.

He discovers the “dark figure” that becomes his shady companion when he enters a cottage in the forest, discovers a mysterious door, and follows his irresistible desire “to see what was beyond it,” despite the warnings of the woman he meets in this cottage. Following his encounter with the Shadow, this woman is shown to be a menacing ogre, who tells him that anyone who has “met one in the forest” such as Anodos has met is likely to be found by his Shadow (60). While this allusion to Anodos’ encounter with the Alder associates the Shadow with sexual transgression, it soon becomes clear that the Shadow’s domain is at once sensual and intellectual. As Anodos continues his journey, he finds himself depending on the Shadow’s capacity “to disenchant,” deceiving himself into believing that it “does away with all appearances and shows [him] things in their true colour and form” (64). Subsequent events, however, show that the Shadow functions not to reveal but, rather, to destroy. Not long after this remark, Anodos meets a young girl, described as one on the threshold of womanhood, who carries a magical and musical globe. He befriends her and becomes intrigued by the globe, though she cautions him that he must be gentle with it. Incited by the Shadow, Anodos repeatedly and forcibly touches the globe until it breaks in his hands and the maiden flees in tears (66). Literary critics

tend to read this event solely for its clear overtones of sexual violation, but Anodos' words about his burning "desire to know about the globe" suggest something more than sensual passion (65).<sup>93</sup> This statement also indicates a repetition of the avaricious yearning for knowledge beyond bounds that led to his discovery of the Shadow in the first place.

Read in the context of the wider contest between rationalism and Romanticism that frames the story, this episode with the globe can be seen to anticipate MacDonald's later prose writings about the relationship between the intellect and the imagination. Both the imagery and the concepts from this scene in *Phantastes* accord with MacDonald's distinctions between "logical conviction" and affective wonder at the close of his essay "The Imagination" (321). Likening the suggestive power of fairy tales to the capacity to awaken music within his readers, MacDonald warns against the crushing effect of "bring[ing] the forces of our intellect to bear upon [this music]" and emphasizes, "we spoil countless precious things by intellectual greed" (322). These remarks at once recall the incident in *Phantastes* and anticipate the distinctions between reason and imagination that MacDonald later outlined in "The Fantastic Imagination." Here, MacDonald claims that the imagination is "nourished by facts" but "refuses to regard science as the sole interpreter of nature, or the laws of science as the only region of discovery" (2). As this expansive construction implies, MacDonald, who had earned prizes in chemistry at Aberdeen University in 1845, writes not to overturn but to reposition reason or science.

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<sup>93</sup> Albert D. Pionke, for example, claims that "it would be difficult to interpret his violation of the maiden's globe in other than sexual terms" (28). Pennington and McGillis's annotated edition of *Phantastes* similarly highlights this interpretation: their notes on the text state frankly, "the breaking of the globe is akin to the tearing of the hymen" (note 5, p. 66).

Citing both Novalis and Francis Bacon, he writes in this essay that the imagination operates in the “scientific region” of inquiry that produces “intellectual truth” but concludes that “poetry” reaches the “higher sphere” described in terms reminiscent of John Keats: “truth in beauty” (14-15).

By differentiating between scientific logic and imaginative poetry, MacDonald ultimately draws a distinction between two different concepts of truth. This distinction can be usefully explained in relation to Paul Ricoeur’s distinctions between “the referential function” and “the poetic function,” as discussed in my introduction (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 102). Furthermore, Ricoeur’s distinction between *rhetoric* and *poetics* as linguistic modes helps to illuminate MacDonald’s preference for imaginative rather than argumentative writing. In his other writings on metaphor, Ricoeur contrasts *rhetoric* and *poetics* to highlight the distinctive process that underlies the latter category: “The rhetoric and the poetic function of language are reciprocally inverse. The first aims at persuading men by giving to discourse pleasing ornaments; the second aims at redescribing reality by the twisting pathway of heuristic fiction” (“Biblical Hermeneutics” 88).<sup>94</sup> Without using these exact terms, MacDonald draws a similar distinction in his contrast between persuasion and enchantment. He claims that a writer must “spare no logical pains” if his aim is “logical conviction,” but the writer who aims to stir the music in his reader must instead “move by suggestion” (“The Fantastic” 321). Throughout his own writings, MacDonald’s didactic method is suggestive, even heuristic, rather than prescriptive.

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<sup>94</sup> Ricoeur’s article “Biblical Hermeneutics” appeared the same year as *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975) and applies much of his theory of metaphor to the broad category of poetics, as well as to the form of the parable.

This swerve away from logical persuasion informs and conditions MacDonald's allusions to Carlyle throughout "The Imagination." Much as EBB does in her review essay on Carlyle for R. H. Horne's *A New Spirit of the Age* (1843), MacDonald emphasizes Carlyle's impassioned and poetic qualities, despite Carlyle's own preference for logical argument. Evoking Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843), he identifies the poet as the maker of metaphors, one with a heart that is "burning with a thought which it could not hold, and had no word for, and needed to shape a word for" (8). Furthermore, MacDonald deems Carlyle's own *French Revolution* (1837) "at once a true picture, a philosophical reflection, [and] a noble poem" (16). His praise for this work as a poem differs markedly from the twentieth-century critical habit of regarding Carlyle as the paradigmatic Victorian sage who inaugurated a mode of social critique that was primarily prosaic, as discussed in my study's introduction.

Although MacDonald's recurring use of the adjective "prophetic" to modify his concept of the imagination recalls Carlyle's characteristic prophetic stance, his biblical allusions in this essay direct attention to another genre: wisdom literature. He quotes once from Proverbs and once from Ecclesiastes to underscore his point that "a wise imagination, which is the presence of the spirit of God, is the very best guide that Man or woman can have" (28, 41-42). Proverbs and Ecclesiastes have typically been regarded as two distinct camps within the biblical wisdom tradition, one conservative and one skeptical, yet MacDonald undoes this distinction on the basis of a shared dialectical model of revelation.<sup>95</sup> Taken together, his references to both Proverbs 25:2 ("*It is the*

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<sup>95</sup> On the basic idea of these two camps within biblical wisdom literature, see the respective studies of Morton Bloomfield (19-20), Robert Preyer (245-46), and James L. Crenshaw (*Old Testament Wisdom* 5-6). MacDonald's combination of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs aligns with the nuanced relationship between these two books outlined by Robert Alter. Alter suggests that, "from a poetic viewpoint," the sayings of Ecclesiastes

glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings *is* to search out a matter”) and Ecclesiastes 3:11 (“he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end”) emphasize that divine things are hidden; when revelation happens, it occurs in conjunction with concealment (41-42).<sup>96</sup>

While the genres of prophetic and wisdom literatures intersect, they have distinctive theological emphasis and embed distinctive models of religious revelation that merit consideration in light of higher critical debates about biblical inspiration. As outlined more fully in my introduction, prophetic literature’s direct claim to be the very words of Yahweh embeds a particular model of inspiration that is not the same as that found in other literary genres, which do not make these claims. Against the backdrop of nineteenth-century debates about how to define the theological idea of *inspiration*, the generic plurality of the biblical canon took on new significance. Although MacDonald does not directly mention nineteenth-century controversies about biblical interpretation in his essay on “The Imagination,” he articulates his own expansive concept of inspiration. In terms that align with Coleridge’s concepts of primary and secondary imagination, MacDonald finds “the inspiration of the Almighty” at work in all human art because this art has “a larger origin than the man alone” (25).<sup>97</sup> Such statements radiate beyond the

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do not invert the teachings of Proverbs but, rather, intensify the characteristic wit of these teachings and take them “in subversive directions” (234).

<sup>96</sup> The biblical quotations given here come from the Authorized Version. MacDonald’s quotations appear to be taken from this translation, but some of his language is inexact.

<sup>97</sup> Coleridge explains this model in *Biographia Literaria*: while the primary imagination is “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,” the secondary imagination is an act of human creation that is different in degree but not in kind (*Collected Works* 7.1.304).

immediate discussion of how to read a fairy tale: they develop the participatory model of revelation that MacDonald outlines in his correspondence.

Unlike EBB, MacDonald makes no mention in his letters of reading particularly controversial works of higher critical scholarship like *Essays and Reviews* or David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*; however, he does address the topic of biblical inspiration in ways that distinguish him from many of his Congregationalist contemporaries. As signalled in my introduction, MacDonald's letters show his clear aversion to the commitment to the very words of scripture upheld by many evangelical Protestants: he claims that "the common theory of the inspiration of the words [of scripture]" is "degrading and evil," asserting that it "produc[es] idolaters of the Bible instead of disciples of Jesus" (*An Expression* 153-54). MacDonald's protest against "the common theory" recalls the spirit/letter distinction that Coleridge makes when he claims that "it is the spirit of the Bible, and not the detached words and sentences, that is infallible and absolute" (*Collected Works* 11. 1151). Furthermore, his strong language echoes Coleridge's condemnation of the "indiscriminate Bibliolatry" that he says gives rise to "forced and fantastic interpretations," including "arbitrary Allegories and mystic explanations of Proper Names" (*Collected Works* 11. 1142). Coleridge drew the term "Bibliolatry" from the German scholar Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, a higher critic who discredited the divinity of Jesus, even though Coleridge himself upheld a Christocentric understanding of biblical texts that runs counter to the higher critical study of Jesus as historical person.<sup>98</sup> MacDonald's attitude toward the higher criticism is similarly

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<sup>98</sup> Lessing's approach to biblical texts was more antagonistic to Christianity than subsequent scholarship by Strauss, even though *Das Leben Jesu* caused more controversy than Lessing's works, which did not circulate as widely. See Daniel L. Pals (9) and Larsen (*Contested Christianity* 53-34).

complex. Through the middle and late decades of the nineteenth century, he retained traditional ideas about the authorship of the Gospels and the authenticity of miracles, even as these ideas lost credibility: such ideas prompt Larsen to distance MacDonald from the higher criticism (*George MacDonald* 71). Yet his Coleridgean language implies a nuanced position regarding the higher criticism, as Kreglinger suggests in her characterization of MacDonald as “not opposed to historical-critical inquiry as such” but as one who “questioned an uncritical embrace of a scientific approach without considering its limitations in leading to knowledge of the transcendent” (*Storied Revelations* 117). This readiness to question shows MacDonald working in a spirit of reverent yet rigorous inquiry, much as Coleridge did in *Confessions* and *Aids to Reflection*.

In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge valorized such an inquisitive disposition by quoting a statement from Archbishop Leighton that “dubious questioning” far surpasses “the senseless deadness which most take for believing” and captioning this particular aphorism as “worthy to be framed and hung up in the library of every theological student.” To provide further commentary on this statement, Coleridge added his own aphorism: “Never be afraid to doubt, if only you have the disposition to believe, and doubt that you may end in believing the truth” (*Collected Works* 9.106-7). While these statements ultimately privilege belief over doubt, they nevertheless emphasize that struggle is a sign of vitality—indeed, an integral part of cultivating faith. MacDonald, who read and owned *Aids to Reflection*, similarly intertwines faith and doubt in his own

statements about his beliefs.<sup>99</sup> Writing to his father in 1854, shortly after his dismissal from the pastorate for charges of heresy, MacDonald defended the state of being in uncertainty as necessary for true sincerity: “*real earnestness is scarcely to be attained in a high degree without doubts and inward questionings*” (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 198). A similar emphasis on productive doubt emerges throughout *Phantastes*, as MacDonald dramatizes the process of seeking wisdom not despite but through uncertainty and even error.

### **Wandering Paths: Desiring Wisdom and Remaking Allegory**

Throughout *Phantastes*, MacDonald represents the pursuit of wisdom as a perambulatory journey, one involving many departures and returns. Just as EBB’s expansive concept of exile underscores that the divine presence follows humankind into the wilderness, so too MacDonald reclaims the state of wandering. As Stephen Prickett puts it, Anodos follows “the path to self-knowledge through disobedience” (*Victorian Fantasy* 174). His wayward tendencies become evident almost immediately upon entering fairyland, when Anodos finds a footpath but abandons it as soon as he meets the forest. His “vague feeling” that he “ought to have followed its course” foreshadows the “cold shiver” and “vague misgiving” that Anodos later experiences just prior to his seduction by the Alder maid and his encounter with his Shadow (45, 57). Even though these trepidations suggest that the desire for independence, love, or knowledge causes Anodos to go astray, MacDonald’s quest narrative focuses less on conformity to the right

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<sup>99</sup> MacDonald’s copy of *Aids to Reflection* is currently held by the Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University (Waco, TX). This book shows evidence of longstanding and affectionate use. The opening pages what appears to be an original sonnet by MacDonald dated 5 November 1847 and dedicated to Louisa Powell, his then fiancée and future wife. Furthermore, the front matter bears both the signature of MacDonald’s father and the bookplate of his son Greville.

path than on the process of journeying and searching. Insofar as *Phantastes* is didactic, it exemplifies what MacDonald later described as “the end of education”: “a noble unrest, an ever-renewed awaking from the dead, a ceaseless questioning of the past for the interpretation of the future, an urging on of the motions of life, which had better far be accelerated into fever, than retarded into lethargy.” Contrary to the idea that education produces “mere repose” and depresses “the animal instincts,” MacDonald’s visceral description of this “noble unrest” underscores his point that “the passion of hunger” may be humankind’s “saviour” (“The Imagination” 1). *Phantastes*, driven as it is by ardent longing, explores this experience of desiring wisdom. MacDonald’s paradoxical idea that “the end of education” consists in an unending search conditions his adaptation of a variety of allegorical texts, including Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590).<sup>100</sup>

Even as the very title *Phantastes* highlights MacDonald’s recourse to *The Faerie Queene*, his allusions to Spenser occur against the backdrop of nineteenth-century debates about the faculty of the imagination. The inside cover of *Phantastes* highlights one element of the literary genealogy informing MacDonald’s work: it bears an altered quotation from Phineas Fletcher’s *The Purple Island* (1633), an allegorical poem about the human body and mind, wherein “Phantastes” personifies the imagination.<sup>101</sup>

Fletcher’s source, in turn, is Book 2 Canto 9 of *The Faerie Queene*, where King Arthur,

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<sup>100</sup> Another text that may have informed *Phantastes* is the late-fourteenth-century dream vision *Piers Plowman*, attributed to William Langland. MacDonald refers to *Piers Plowman* briefly in the literary criticism offered in his *England’s Antiphon*, remarking that though it is “a poem of great influence,” he himself “do[es] not find much poetry in it” (30). Nevertheless, there are some fascinating similarities between the two texts, including their concern with right action, charity, and imagination.

<sup>101</sup> MacDonald’s quotation from Fletcher, found in the 1858 first edition and all subsequent editions, reads “Phantastes from ‘their fount’ all shapes deriving, / In new habiliments can quickly dight.” In their annotated edition, John Pennington and Roderick McGillis highlight that the original line reads “*Phantastes* from the first all shapes deriving, / In new habiliments can quickly dight” (note 1, xliii). For a discussion of MacDonald’s many allusions to *The Faerie Queene*, see Docherty (“The Sources” 39-46).

Sir Guyon, and squire Palmer meet Phantastes in the castle of Alma. One of Alma's three counsellors, Phantastes "could things to come foresee"; however, even though he has "a sharp foresight and working wit," he keeps the company of "idle thoughts and fantasies, / Devices, dreames, opinions unsound" (II.XIX.49.1, 48.8, 51.7-9). Phantastes himself appears as "full of melancholy," with "sharpe staring eyes / That mad or foolish seemed" (II.XIX.52.5, 6-7). This description is rather similar to Carlyle's description of "Fantasy" in *Sartor Resartus* (1833): Carlyle highlights the "sheen either of Inspiration or Madness" that imbues this "Godlike" yet arbitrary organ (165, 168). As Prickett explains, early nineteenth-century writers including Carlyle and Coleridge distinguished between the previously synonymous terms "fantasy" and "imagination," regarding the "subjective" and "exaggerated" fantasy as "the underside, or obverse" of the imagination's transformative and revelatory power (*Victorian Fantasy* 6-9). These distinctions inform *Phantastes*, which responds in inventive ways to its literary precursors.

Rather than personify Phantastes, MacDonald leaves oblique the connection between the story's title and the protagonist's experiences. Anodos twice refers to the "white hall of phantasy," describing both his brief encounter with the lady he first discovered as a marble statue, whom he frequently refers to as his own "white lady," and the ongoing desire that drives his subsequent actions (118, 133). The second of these passages collapses the distinctions made by Carlyle and Coleridge: it is, for Anodos, the "imagination" that fills him with "its own multitudinous colours and harmonies" within the "white hall of phantasy" (133). Although MacDonald's prose writings differentiate between fancy and imagination, his terms do not quite align with Coleridge's desynonymy. Whereas Coleridge regarded fancy as "a mere dead arrangement" of

“fixities and definites,” in contrast to the imagination’s “living power” (*Collected Works* 7.1), MacDonald softens this distinction by saying that fancy produces “mere inventions, however lovely” and that the imagination offers “new embodiments of old truths” (“The Fantastic” 314). As Anodos relinquishes his own ideals in favour of a selfless understanding of love, *Phantastes* traces the maturation of a more capacious imaginative faculty. Not unlike the Knight of Temperance in Spenser’s poem, Anodos learns to balance emotion and action.

MacDonald engages with pointedly masculine and pointedly Christian traditions of self-formation in his medieval *bildungsroman*, as the Spenserian intertexts exemplify; even so, his own protagonist progresses toward an androgynous self-understanding, and his story draws from several different kinds of mysticism. Though MacDonald’s feminism remains a contested issue among critics, various scholars have highlighted his departure from patriarchal conventions: for instance, Roderick McGillis argues that *Phantastes* shows MacDonald’s “interest in freeing the female from male domination” (43), and Bonnie Gaarden claims more broadly that MacDonald “anticipated the modern quest for the feminine face of God” (*The Christian Goddess* 1).<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, MacDonald’s attempts to uncover this “feminine face of God” draw from a diverse range of literary and theological thinkers, including Emmanuel Swedenborg, Jacob Boheme, and Novalis (Gaarden, *The Christian Goddess* 119; Kreglinger, “Poets, Dreamers, and

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<sup>102</sup> While I agree with Gaarden’s assessment of *Phantastes* and many of MacDonald’s fairy tales for children, it is worth noting that his final fantastic work for adults, *Lilith* (1895), is difficult to read from a feminist perspective. As McGillis puts it, MacDonald here “tries to reassert the authority of masculine control which ... he had undermined in *Phantastes*” (43, 47). Indeed, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar quote from MacDonald’s *Lilith* as one of their epigraphs to their landmark book *The Madwoman and the Attic* (1979). A thoroughgoing critique of MacDonald’s representations of women appears in David Holbrook’s *A Study of George MacDonald and the Image of Woman* (2000), a psychoanalytic reading that identifies fear and unconscious hate of women throughout all his writings.

Mediators” 25-36). This range is in keeping with the universalist leanings that led to MacDonald’s dismissal from the Congregational Church: if he stops short of endorsing an open canon, MacDonald nevertheless pushes the boundaries of canonical authority. Throughout *Phantastes*, MacDonald offers both theological and gendered innovations in the various feminine wisdom figures who guide Anodos on his journey. These figures help Anodos to acquire what Katherine Bubel perceptively identifies as the “relational and multi-dimensional wisdom” that MacDonald derived from Boheme and other mystics and used to challenge “the hegemonic, Cartesian way of knowing” (8). As subsequent sections will show, MacDonald expresses this relational wisdom through story and song. Significantly, the feminine wisdom figures who populate *Phantastes* appear not merely as the objects of art, as convention would have it, but as active craftswomen. Taken together, MacDonald’s innovations underscore that his concept of the imagination’s education does not consist in conformity to any single moral system: his fairy tale is insistently multiple in both its didactic and its artistic modes.

This commitment to multiplicity helps to explain MacDonald’s reservations with the category of *allegory*, despite his appreciative recourse to several allegorical texts throughout *Phantastes*. In “The Fantastic Imagination,” MacDonald emphasizes that, though a fairy tale may include allegorical elements, it is itself “not an allegory” and claims that a “strict allegory” tends to produce “a weariness to the spirit” (317). His remarks serve less to censure a particular genre than to reject the idea of an explicit, stable code for deciphering meaning. Highlighting these nuances, Prickett argues that MacDonald aims primarily “to differentiate between the mechanical rigidity of ‘strict allegory’ and what he calls a ‘fairy-tale,’ which uses allegory as one of a number of

modes of symbolic narration” (*Victorian Fantasy* 173-74). Prickett emphasizes that MacDonald’s fairy tales depart from the explicit, controlled, and unitary model of allegory exemplified by John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678)—though this particular model should hardly be conflated with all allegory. Indeed, MacDonald’s identification of symbolic polysemy as a defining characteristic of artistic excellence prizes the very playful, dynamic, and plastic qualities that Erich Auerbach traces in the etymology of both *typos* and *figura* (“Figura” 12-15). According to MacDonald, “a genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean” (317). As Auerbach’s work shows, a similar emphasis on plenitude characterized figural interpretation from Tertullian through Augustine. Auerbach further explains that though the allegorical interpretation practiced by many of the church fathers gave equal emphasis to historical and figurative qualities, a later school of allegorical exegesis aimed to “spirit away” the “historical character” of scriptural texts (“Figura” 36).<sup>103</sup> In nineteenth-century Britain, the tensions between unitary and pluralistic allegory, as well as between historical and figurative methods, were exacerbated by the higher criticism.

MacDonald’s remarks suggest the extent to which *allegory* became a contested term in the wake of higher critical interpretive debates. In the preface to *Das Leben Jesu*, Strauss emphatically distinguished the “allegorical view” that he identifies with traditional Christian exegesis from his own “mythic method.” According to Strauss, “the allegorical view attributes the narrative to a supernatural source, whilst the mythical view

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<sup>103</sup> Although Auerbach does not specify the practitioners of this school, he names Philo and Origen as exegetes for whom “mystical and moral considerations seem definitely to overshadow the strictly historical element.” In a qualified fashion, he identifies them as precedents for the “spiritual and extrahistorical form of interpretation” characteristic of the Alexandrine school. Auerbach suggests that this method, wherein “Jewish history and national character had vanished,” aided the spread of “the universal religion of salvation” to “the Celtic and Germanic peoples” (“Figura” 36, 55, 52).

ascribes it to that *natural* process by which legends are originated and developed” (65). Prior to Strauss, Coleridge had protested against the allegorical readings that he regarded as emptying the Word of God of its imaginative power, albeit in different terms. *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816) sharply distinguished between allegory and symbolism: in Coleridge’s words, an allegory offers “but a translation of abstract notions into a picture language,” whereas a symbol “always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible” (*Collected Works* 6.30). Deborah L. Madsen suggests that Coleridge’s desynonymy should be understood in relation to a longstanding debate “between fabulism and figuralism” as modes of allegory (112). Fabulism, as Madsen explains it, restricts “the signifying capacity of words to a single meaning,” presuming “a one-to-one semantic correspondence” (104). By contrast, figuralism reveals “a continuity among signs” that implies “the existence of a providential scheme” but “cannot make that scheme present to human knowledge” and thus allows for “a polyvalence of significance” (104). As Madsen’s account shows, debates about allegorical interpretation pertain not only to intrinsic versus extrinsic meaning, as emphasized by both Strauss and Coleridge, but also to singular versus plural meanings. MacDonald’s emphasis on uncertainty and plurality places him closer to what Madsen identifies as the figural mode of allegory.

Responses to *Phantastes* from the British periodical press further highlight these conflicting definitions of *allegory* and draw attention to the issues of narrative design and authorial intent that MacDonald addresses in his essays. While *Phantastes* contributed to the growth of MacDonald’s literary reputation and attracted favourable attention from

Charles Dodgson, most reviews were mixed at best.<sup>104</sup> The reviewer for the *Athenaeum* concluded that MacDonald had “attempted an allegory” but failed, claiming that “allegory shows us life moving with its shadow,” but “MacDonald has given us the shadow without the life” (201). Deeming *Phantastes* “a riddle that will not be read,” this reviewer implies that an allegory unfolds according to two levels of meaning, connected via a single and stable interpretive key. Likewise, the *Spectator* reviewer’s comment that parts of MacDonald’s story “appear to be allegorical” yet cannot be interpreted “satisfactorily” presumes that an allegory must be easily decipherable (204). Conversely, a January 1859 notice from the *Eclectic Review* claims that *Phantastes* is an allegory precisely because its meaning is elusive: “It is in fact an allegory. There is no use in our attempting an interpretation of it. Few allegories go on all fours. They limp occasionally, and we dare say that this one limps a good deal” (208). The *British Quarterly Review* similarly highlights the book’s enigmatic qualities and lack of an explicit hermeneutic code, observing that the reader must “dimly interpret” the protagonist’s adventures “without feeling at all sure that Mr. MacDonald or Anodos himself saw them in the same light” (209). As MacDonald emphasizes in “The Fantastic Imagination,” this dilemma is precisely the point of his suggestive style: readers are not to search for the author’s intent but to pursue their own meaning.

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<sup>104</sup> See Prickett’s discussion of the reception of *Phantastes* and Dodgson’s admiration for it (*Victorian Fantasies* 150). John Docherty’s *The Literary Products of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship* (1997) explores the connections between the two authors, particularly between 1860 and 1864. *Phantastes* received renewed attention in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when two illustrated editions were released. In 1894, Chatto and Windus released a subsequent edition containing twenty-five illustrations by John Bell, much to the dismay and chagrin of the MacDonald family, who were unaware of these illustrations until their publication. MacDonald’s son Greville tried to suppress this edition and oversaw a third edition (Arthur C. Fifield, 1905) featuring illustrations by Arthur Hughes, who had illustrated MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* and *The Princess and the Goblin*.

Throughout the Socratic dialogue embedded within this essay, MacDonald engages with his interlocutor on the question of how to best interpret fairy tales. He affirms both that meaning is inherently multiple and that meaning is, at least in part, constructed by individuals, each of whom “will read its meaning after his own nature and development” (316). In response to the question “how am I to assure myself that I am not reading my own meaning into it, but yours out of it?” MacDonald replies, “It may be better that you should read your meaning into it. That may be a higher operation of your intellect than the mere reading of mine out of it: your meaning may be superior to mine” (316-17). For MacDonald, then, the goal of interpretation is not to recover a text’s original significance but to initiate an interactive process between the reader and the text. In effect, MacDonald repositions both author and reader in relation to a divine significance that infuses all symbolic language yet remains imperfectly grasped.

This interpretive theory aligns with the model of biblical exegesis advanced in Coleridge’s *Confessions*, though MacDonald surpasses Coleridge by extending this model to texts beyond the biblical canon. As Sue Zemka explains, Coleridge’s epistolary essay focuses on “the dialectical exchanges that transpire between the spirit that writes and the spirit that reads” (65). Coleridge foregrounds readerly transformation, identifying the disposition of “seek[ing] truth . . . with humble spirit” as a precondition for a true encounter with “the Word of God” (*Works* 11.1154). At the same time, he emphasizes that the reader’s work of searching must be guided by the divine spirit that imbues “the organ and instrument of all the gifts, powers, and tendencies, by which the individual is privileged to rise above himself—to leave behind, and lose his individual phantom self, in order to find his true self in that distinctness where no division can be—in the Eternal I

AM, the ever-living WORD” (*Works* 11. 1155). Similarly, MacDonald claims that a writer “cannot help his words and figures falling into such combinations in the mind of another as he had himself not foreseen” because the raw material of all human expression consists of “God’s things, his embodied thoughts” (320). Departing from Friedrich Schleiermacher’s emphasis on recovering authorial intent, which Schleiermacher himself presented as an endless, ambiguous task (*Hermeneutics and Criticism* 24), MacDonald grounds meaning in a divine essence that is both elusive and malleable. This resituating of authorial intent underpins the model of reading advanced throughout *Phantastes*, from the story’s chapter epigraphs to its interpolated narrative. The aphoristic epigraphs that preface each chapter foreground the story’s dense allusiveness and approximate the dialogic mode of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflections*, itself driven by aphoristic play. Both Coleridge and MacDonald turn to older literary and theological traditions to dramatize and, ultimately, to initiate readerly transformation.

### **Wondering Aphorisms: Tradition, Transformation, and Readerly Self-Discovery**

Just as the journey into fairyland occurs as the result of a wish that Anodos had voiced while listening to a fairy tale, so also his adventures in this magical realm are closely tied to acts of reading. The first time that a cottager offers him hospitality, Anodos peruses “a great old volume” containing “many wondrous tales of Fairy Land, and olden Times, and the Knights of King Arthur’s table” (13). These stories include an account of Sir Percivale’s narrow escape from a “demon lady” in the forest, thus foreshadowing Anodos’ own misadventures (14). Anodos does not heed this tale’s warning, yet these elements of *Phantastes* anticipate MacDonald’s claim in his later essay that books are “the readiest means” of feeding creativity because they supply “the

wonder of words” (“The Imagination” 37-38). Anodos experiences this wonder most keenly when he is midway through his travels: after the incident with the girl and her globe, he finds an abandoned boat, drifts aimlessly, and arrives at an uninhabited palace where his Shadow is unable to follow him.<sup>105</sup> He explores the palace and discovers a library, recounting that for days on end he “read, and read, until weary; if that can be designated as weariness, which was rather the faintness of rapturous delight” (79). This remark assigns an inexhaustible wonder to the library, which, with its walls “lined from floor to roof with books and books,” suggests the *mise-en-abyme* that is MacDonald’s own fairy story. Put another way, in its many references to English and German literature, *Phantastes* itself offers something of a library. The aphoristic epigraphs that preface the individual chapters underscore this dense allusiveness and display MacDonald’s inventive engagement with these texts.

In his use of aphorisms for creative and even ironic ends, MacDonald participates in a Romantic literary tradition that includes William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793). Blake’s “Proverbs of Hell” demonstrates the subversive potential of this form: enigmatic statements such as “Shame is Pride’s cloak” and “Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion” recall the inverted parallelism of the sayings in the biblical Proverbs, even as they revise this book’s images (11-12).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Docherty identifies this incident as an inversion of Phaedria’s “self-propelled boat” in Book 2 Canto 6 of *The Faerie Queene* (41). Spenser appears to be the precedent for MacDonald’s representations of Anodos’ reading in the library: not long after meeting Phantastes and Alma’s other counsellors, King Arthur and Sir Guyon proceed to read *Briton Monuments* and *Antiquity of Faeryland* (II.XIX.59-60).

<sup>106</sup> Blake’s insistence that “without contraries is no progression” (4) aligns with the “provocative contradictions” that James Hatton identifies as integral to the biblical Book of Proverbs (151). Hatton contends that this book is not “a complacent mouthpiece” for a conservative wisdom tradition but a book “crafted to encourage readers to question traditional wisdom and to develop their critical faculties” (3). Applying the Bakhtinian term “heteroglossalic” to Proverbs, Hatton argues that Proverbs, like Job and Ecclesiastes, is a dialogic text in its theological and ideological contradictions. See also Robert Alter’s study

Similarly, MacDonald's aphoristic epigraphs function not as static repetitions of the texts quoted but as creative reinterpretations. For instance, the epigram from Shelley's "Alastor: or, the Spirit of Solitude" (1816) that is prefixed to the first chapter sets the stage for the journey of MacDonald's own poet Anodos, even as *Phantastes* questions the Romantic concept of the individual genius in favour of a more dialogic model.

An important precedent for MacDonald's dialogic model appears in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, where Coleridge writes as both a collector and a creator of aphorisms. As E. S. Shaffer underscores, this text, which puts together the work of seventeenth-century divines and the commentary through which Coleridge seeks to connect these writings to his own time, effects "dialogism across history" (221). Joshua King further calls attention to the "spiritual community" that Coleridge creates through his direct addresses to his imagined readers, ideally young men beginning to enter the ministry of the Church (22-23). The invitational qualities of Coleridge's text are heightened by its aphoristic patterning, which John Beer's editorial introduction identifies as a response to Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) (*Collected Works* 9.lxvi-lxvii). Citing "the aphorisms of Solomon" as the precedent for his own work and commenting on select passages from Proverbs, Bacon defines aphorisms in contradistinction to methods (341-42). Whereas methods "dress up the sciences into bodies, and make men imagine that they have them complete," aphorisms "carry with them an invitation to others for adding and lending their assistance" (265). Ricoeur advances similar terms in his own remarks on this form: "The aphorism suggests at the same time that everything has already been

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of the tightly crafted "poetry of wit" that characterizes the Book of Proverbs, which draws attention to the creative work of the redactor in crafting the book's structure (*The Art of Biblical Poetry* 163-84).

said enigmatically and yet that it is always necessary to begin everything and to begin it again in the dimension of thinking” (*The Symbolism of Evil* 349). Despite its seeming epigrammatic closure, then, the aphorism opens toward the reader.

MacDonald quotes Bacon’s aphoristic statements several times throughout “The Imagination,” each time underscoring this openness: even as he evokes Bacon as an authority, he repositions his words. Although he quotes Bacon’s claim that “wonder” is “the seed of knowledge” (15), he clearly identifies wonder as not only the origin but also the purpose of knowledge: for MacDonald, the end of education is “a noble unrest” (1). MacDonald thus offers something closer to what Coleridge outlines in *Aids to Reflection*. Evoking Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Coleridge advances the following statement in his “Aphorisms on Spiritual Religion”: “In Wonder all Philosophy began, in Wonder it ends: and Admiration fills up the interspace” (*Collected Works* 9.236). Furthermore, MacDonald augments Bacon’s statement that “a prudent question is the half of knowledge” by posing his own question “whence comes this prudent question?” and answering “from the imagination” (13). He thus valorizes the imagination’s generative capacity beyond what Bacon says in *The Advancement of Learning*. MacDonald’s esteem for the imagination has more in common with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s challenge to the methods of scientific positivism and emphasis on the imagination’s capacity “to expose real, productive questions” (“The Universality of the Problem” 12). For both thinkers, imaginative questioning is the *sine qua non* of pursuing truth.

This intensive engagement with literary history distinguishes the subjectivist model of interpretation offered by Coleridge and MacDonald from that advanced in Jowett’s “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” even though in other respects Jowett owes

much to Coleridge. Against what he regards as the hegemony of ecclesiastical powers, Jowett emphasizes the interpretive authority of the individual reader, independent of the Church. He argues not only for the restoration of the original, historical meaning of a biblical text but also that the “truths of Scripture” would “have greater reality if divested of the scholastic form in which theology has cast them” (534). Unlike Jowett, Coleridge and MacDonald offer something closer to Gadamer’s insistence that interpretation necessarily involves dialogue with both the text and with the past: Gadamer argues that readers must “recognize the element of tradition” and “inquire into its hermeneutic productivity” (*Truth and Method* 284).<sup>107</sup> Prickett’s discussion of MacDonald in relation to four competing ideas of tradition that circulated in mid-nineteenth-century Britain underscores this common ground, though without directly connecting him to Gadamer. Showing that MacDonald has some affinities both to John Henry Newman’s concept of tradition as developing over time and to Johann Gottfried Herder’s concept of tradition as a creative reading of the past, Prickett ultimately concludes that MacDonald’s vision is unique for the nineteenth century in that it sees tradition as “vital, yet in the end serving to point beyond itself” (“The Idea of Tradition” 14-15). As MacDonald suggests in *Phantastes*, the end resides, ultimately, with the reader’s ethical growth.

MacDonald hints at this transformation when Anodos recounts his immersive experiences of reading in the fairy palace. Making what he calls “a somewhat vain attempt to describe” the “peculiarity” of these books, Anodos reflects that he always finds

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<sup>107</sup> Gadamer’s rehabilitation of tradition has been critiqued, most famously by Jürgen Habermas, who questions the ideological function of this concept of tradition. Ricoeur’s intervention in the Gadamer-Habermas debate positions the thinkers dialectically, preserving alike some elements of Gadamer’s hermeneutics of hope and Habermas’s hermeneutics of suspicion (see B. H. McLean 237-40).

himself inside the text. In the case of fiction, he remarks, “I took the place of the character who was most like myself, and his story was mine” (80). In effect, MacDonald offers a fascinating twist on Schleiermacher’s imperative that the interpreter should put himself “in the place of the author” (*Hermeneutics and Criticism* 24). By putting the reader in the place of the character, MacDonald shifts attention from textual origins to readerly experience. Right interpretation, then, requires more than simply discerning accurate information: it is a transformative process. MacDonald dramatizes this model of interpretation when Anodos recounts in detail a particular book that he reads in the library: the story of Cosmo von Wehrstahl, the Princess von Hohenweiss, and an enchanted looking glass. Beyond foreshadowing the events to come, this story clarifies the process by which Anodos learns to recognize himself.

Much like *Phantastes* itself, the interpolated narrative of Cosmo von Wehrstahl is a story of magic, longing, maturation, and self-sacrifice. Cosmo, a poor but noble university student in Prague, purchases a beautiful mirror from an antique shop. When he takes the mirror home, he discovers its capacity to beautify his chamber: rather than offering “mere representation,” the mirror transfigures the things that it reflects “out of the region of fact into the realm of art” (96). Gazing into this mirror, Cosmo sees “the graceful form of a woman, clothed all in white,” who remains out of reach or communication (96). Cosmo becomes fascinated by the woman and begins to regard the mirror as his “secret treasure,” which the narrator likens to a miser’s “golden hoard” (99). He learns incantations that allow him to speak with the woman, who tells him that she is under a spell and implores him to set her free by breaking the mirror. Cosmo hesitates for a moment, unwilling to give up his only means of contact with the princess; when he

attempts to destroy the mirror with his sword, it vanishes. He then searches for the mirror, ultimately succeeding in breaking it yet becoming fatally wounded in the process. Just before his death, he reunites with the princess and they affirm their love for each other.

Without directly remarking the similarities between Cosmo's desire for the Princess von Hohenweiss and his own yearning for the white lady, Anodos seems to dimly perceive the story's implications. He calls it "a simple story of ordinary life . . . wherein two souls, loving each other and longing to come nearer, do, after all, but behold each other as in a glass darkly" (91). In addition to evoking 1 Corinthians 13:12 ("For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face"), Anodos echoes Cosmo's remarks about his inability to approach the princess: "how many who love never come nearer than to behold each other as in a mirror; seem to know and yet never know the inward life?" (101). Taken together, these images suggest that the mirror in the story pertains not just to limited knowledge but also to a limiting idea of love.<sup>108</sup> Anodos effectively recapitulates Cosmo's act of breaking the mirror when he resolves to shatter his own illusions upon leaving the library of the fairy palace and ceasing to speak of the lady as if she were his: as he puts it to himself, "I no longer called her to myself *my* white lady" (127). The story's magic mirror, then, at once reflects the alluring power of the imagination and reveals the error of conflating possession with intimacy.

In addition to the mirror *represented within* the interpolated narrative, MacDonald calls attention to the mirroring *performed by* this story, which serves to illuminate the reader's inner life. As Anodos indicates when he introduces the tale of Cosmo, he

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<sup>108</sup> While my analysis of MacDonald and desire does not employ a psychoanalytic framework, other critics pursue the mirror as figuring the mirror stage: see, for example, Gray's use of Lacan and Kristeva (886-87), as well as Gaarden's Jungian discussion of "anima projection" ("George MacDonald's *Phantastes* 11).

experiences himself less as reading than as being read: he explains that the book “glowed and flashed the thoughts upon the soul, with such a power that the medium disappeared from the consciousness” (90). These images align with MacDonald’s later description of his own fairy stories as a flashing firefly, a delicate creature that requires us “not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear on it, but to be still and let it work on that part of us for whose sake it exists” (321). MacDonald sees right reading as effecting an almost ontological change, as Gabelman suggests when he contextualizes MacDonald’s concept of imaginative reading within the *lectio divina* tradition as practiced by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Gabelman uses this model not only to analyze the interpolated narrative of *Phantastes* but also to comment on MacDonald’s written sermon “The Mirrors of the Lord” (1889), which addresses 2 Corinthians 3:18 (“But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord”) (192-99). Extending Gabelman’s analysis, I suggest that MacDonald participates in the longstanding scripture-as-mirror tradition that Jean Louis Chrétien identifies as informing exegetes from St. Augustine to Karl Barth. As Chrétien explains, the underlying concept of this tradition is that “one discovers Revelation only by being discovered by Revelation” (23). Here again, the individual does not read the Word so much as become read by the Word.

A similar reversal of subject/object positions underpins the interpretive ideas that emerge in the writings of both MacDonald and Coleridge. While the basic analogy of looking in a mirror underpins both the title and content of *Aids to Reflection, Confessions*

applies this metaphor specifically to the reading of biblical texts.<sup>109</sup> Coleridge emphasizes that “where ever the Light of Revelation has shone,” it illuminates the readers’ hearts: “the hungry have found food, the thirsty a living spring, the feeble a staff” but “an Idler or a Scoffer” would discover things only after his own inclinations (*Collected Works* 11.1154). He further declares that it is readers who are discovered by the truth: as Coleridge puts it, “in the Bible there is more, *that finds me*” than “in all other books put together” (*Collected Works* 11.1123). For his part, MacDonald claims that, because all human creativity arises from participating in the divine mind, an individual is “rather *being thought* than *thinking*” (“The Imagination” 4). On the basis of this concept, he applies to all literature the text-as-mirror model that Coleridge applies to the Bible. Like Coleridge, MacDonald claims that interpretation reflects the reader’s disposition: one who is “not a true man” will perceive evil in even “the best art,” while a “true man” will “imagine true things” regardless of the author’s intention (“The Fantastic” 320). In *Phantastes*, Anodos ascribes to the story of Cosmo similar qualities as to the ones that Coleridge ascribes to the Bible: “in after hours . . . portions of what I read there have often come to me again, with an unexpected comforting” (110). By transposing this concept of revelation to other books, MacDonald advances a model of revelation that is similar to that found in Søren Kierkegaard’s preface to *Four Upbuilding Discourses* (1844), in which Kierkegaard likens his own book to a messenger that seeks the reader (84-85). Moreover, Kierkegaard’s recourse to the scripture as mirror tradition to defend a

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<sup>109</sup> Coleridge’s fourth aphorism in *Aids to Reflection*, drawn from Leighton, underscores the reflection/mirror analogy (*Collected Works* 9.12). King notes that the image of the mirror recurs in *Biographia Literaria*, where Coleridge uses this analogy to distinguish his own model of reflection from the mechanized associationism of David Hartley (32).

subjectivist model of reading usefully illuminates MacDonald's parallel insistence that application is the end of interpretation.<sup>110</sup>

Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination* (1851) meditates on the first chapter of the Epistle of James, where the apostle exhorts readers to be "doers of the word" and declares "if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was" (1:23-24). Working with this comparison, he calls attention to the imperative to see oneself in the mirror, as opposed to simply looking at the mirror as an object (396-97). For Kierkegaard, looking at oneself in the mirror requires a personal, devotional mode, wherein readers must say to themselves, "It is I to whom [the Word] is speaking, it is I about whom it is speaking" (397). As Chrétien explains, Kierkegaard does not absolutely reject higher critical scholarship but rather "inaugurates a doctrine of the 'double truth' of the Bible" as both "a historical and literary document" and as the timeless and living "Word of God" (33). To underscore the need for a subjective mode of reading, Kierkegaard recalls the parable that the prophet Nathan tells King David after he takes Bathsheba from Uriah and sends Uriah to the front lines of the battle: a rich man provides for a visiting traveler by slaughtering the only lamb of a poor man in that same city (cf. 2 Samuel 12:1-4).<sup>111</sup> Kierkegaard explains that David's initial response ("the man that hath done this *thing* shall die" [12:5]) indicates that he has heard

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<sup>110</sup> Although Kierkegaard was unknown to MacDonald, these two thinkers share interesting commonalities. Prickett briefly notes their intellectual affinities, though without going into detail or discussing the specific texts that I am examining ("The Idea of Tradition" 15).

<sup>111</sup> The form of the embedded parable will be the main subject of analysis in my third chapter, which will adapt the work of both Ricoeur and Susan E. Colón to analyze the narrative strategies whereby parables demand the reader's embodied response.

this tale merely in an objective way; it is only when Nathan says to him “Thou *art* the man” (12:7) that subjective understanding begins (401). As this parable suggests, confronting the reality that one finds in the mirror is a painful, even excruciating, event; however, this recognition has the capacity to initiate change and renewal.

In *Phantastes*, Anodos appears to be rather like the man described in the Book of James, who gazes at himself and then immediately forgets what he looks like—that is, he must experience multiple moments of recognition before he undergoes what Kierkegaard theorizes as the transformation from objective to subjective reading. MacDonald thus highlights both the priority and the difficulty of the task of application. After the story of Cosmo concludes, Anodos encounters in the fairy palace his own Princess von Hohenweiss—the white lady he has pursued for so long, who now appears as one of many statues in the palace’s music hall. He sings to her of his longing love and, in defiance of a prohibition written near the statues (“TOUCH NOT!”), embraces her; she then springs to life, rebukes him, and flees through a set of doors (113-24).<sup>112</sup> Violating another prohibition inscribed on these doors (“*No one enters here without leave of the Queen*”), Anodos pursues her, only to find himself abruptly transported to a desolate hill (125). Through a series of uncanny returns, he receives additional opportunities to relinquish his possessive hold on his ideal. He thereby matures into a more capacious understanding of love, one that allows him to abide with his longing for the unattainable lady and to reframe this desire less as lack than as fullness.

### **In the Fullness of Love: MacDonald’s Theology of Immanence**

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<sup>112</sup> As Pennington and McGillis note in their edition of *Phantastes*, this prohibition reflects a standard fairy-tale trope, such as the warning against touching the spindle in Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty” (1696). Within *Phantastes*, this incident recalls the scene in which Anodos breaks the maiden’s globe (113, note 11).

Following the interpolated narrative, the remaining episodes in *Phantastes* show the protagonist's incremental, imperfect attempts to manifest this love. Cast out of the fairy palace, Anodos moves gradually through desolation to consolation. He descends a rocky chasm into a "pandemonium of fairy devils," goblin-like creatures who taunt him, "you shan't have her; you shan't have her; he! he! he! She's for a better man" (128). As this "battery of malevolence" ignites "a spark of nobleness" within Anodos, he responds, "Well, if he is a better man, let him have her"—and immediately the goblins fall silent (128). After he leaves the subterranean realm, Anodos once again drifts away in an abandoned boat and arrives at a cottage where an old woman cares for him, sings to him, and teaches him. In response to her instructions, he travels through a magic door and learns that the lady he adores does, indeed, love another man—the very knight who rescued him from the Ash and Alder. After making this discovery and returning through the door, Anodos describes himself as "loving the white lady as [he] had never loved her before," though for the next few chapters he is silent about this love (150). When he leaves the old woman's cottage, he joins forces with two brother princes in their mission to protect their realm from giants, and his courage in battle earns him knighthood. No sooner does Anodos proudly count himself as ranking "side by side with Sir Galahad" than he is met once again by his Shadow, who imprisons him in a high tower (170). In an unexpected turn, he becomes rescued by the very maiden whose globe he had once broken. Humbled, the newly freed Anodos offers himself as a squire to the white lady's knight, describing himself as devoted to him "because she loved him" (179). Ultimately, Anodos dies to protect him, thus ending his adventures in fairyland.

MacDonald's penultimate chapter underscores the quixotic elements of this romantic quest, as well as its sincerity. Anodos continues to narrate even though dead, effectively attending his own funeral, and observes, "the knight, and the lady I loved, wept over me. Her tears fell on my face" (189). This scene offers a "comic parody of an adolescent fantasy," one that lends a surprisingly ludic quality to MacDonald's story of self-sacrificing love, as Docherty aptly observes ("The Sources" 45). The deceased squire's still unresolved desire for the lady takes centre stage through MacDonald's gentle yet unmistakable humour. Even so, Anodos' subsequent remarks about love comprise one of the most impassioned and earnest passages in all of *Phantastes*:

I knew now, that it is by loving, and not by being loved, that one can come nearest the soul of another; yea, that where two love, it is the loving of each other, and not the being loved by each other, that originates and perfects and assures their blessedness. I knew that love gives to him that loveth, power over any soul beloved, even if that soul know him not, bringing him inwardly close to that spirit; a power that cannot be but for good; for in proportion as selfishness intrudes, the love ceases, and the power which springs therefrom dies. Yet all love will, one day, meet with its return. All true love will, one day, behold its own image in the eyes of the beloved, and be humbly glad. (191)

Just as the emphasis on active and selfless love shows Anodos' beginning to apply the interpolated narrative to his own experiences, so also the idea of love beholding its own likeness in the eyes of the beloved transforms the story's mirroring imagery. This transformation is all the more striking because Anodos' story ends differently than does that of Cosmo: funeral tears aside, Anodos does not receive a final declaration of love. Still, what Anodos experiences is not a tidy progression from *eros* to *caritas*. His words imply the continuation of romantic desire, albeit one that is reframed in relation to a love that encompasses and exceeds it. Furthermore, his archaisms ("loveth" and "yea") approximate the cadences of the King James Bible, recalling the Johannine passages about the power of perfect love.

These Johannine passages are cited in MacDonald's correspondence, where they underpin his distinctly relational theology. In a letter dated 12 November 1877, he muses, "Blessed be the God that makes us love each other. Is that not part of the meaning of the God of Love? It is the one thing he cares about. I see more and more into the religion there is in our relation to our fellow-men. I come nearer to understanding that if a man does not love his brother he cannot love God" (*An Expression* 272). Here, MacDonald evokes 1 John 4:7-8, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." Through this recourse to Johannine theology, MacDonald emphasizes that the divine presence is manifest in love—more, that God can be known only through human fellowship. Once again, his theology follows that of Coleridge, who evokes the same chapter from 1 John in the opening of *Confessions* when he says that the gradual increase of "spiritual discernment" should proceed "without the servile fear that prevents or overclouds the free honor that cometh from Love," citing 1 John 4:18 (*Collected Works* 11. 1116). In effect, both Coleridge and MacDonald advance a theology of immanence that reprises the concept of love described in 1 John 4: "God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him . . . . No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us" (4:9, 12). A similarly mysterious and capacious understanding of the incarnation animates *Phantastes*.

MacDonald's emphasis on the Word made flesh aligns with the mid-nineteenth-century theological shift that Boyd Hilton describes as the transition from the Age of Atonement to the Age of Incarnation, as noted in chapter 1 (5-6). Remarking that

MacDonald spoke of *Phantastes*, published in late October, as a tale “for the Christmas season,” Larsen contextualizes MacDonald within this theological shift and identifies “the centrality of the doctrine of the incarnation” as “a contributing factor in the elevation of Christmas as a supreme holiday in that time period” (*George MacDonald* 34, 21).

MacDonald’s commitment to the incarnation is further evident in his review of Robert Browning’s “Christmas-Eve,” published in the *Monthly Christian Spectator* in May 1853. Browning’s dramatic monologue features a speaker who goes on a supernatural nocturnal journey from a British dissenting chapel to a Roman basilica to a German lecture-hall. The speaker gradually relinquishes his satiric rejection of misguided exegesis, from the allegorical reading of the preacher who finds in the Baker’s “dream of Baskets Three” in Genesis 40 proof of “the doctrine of the Trinity” (ll. 233-34) to the higher criticism modelled by “the hawk-nosed high-cheek-boned Professor” (l. 813). In this process, the speaker comes to recognize all of these interpretations as inherently flawed yet potentially offering a path to the truth. Moreover, the speaker discovers Jesus himself in every location on this nighttime journey: “he was there. / He himself with his human air” (ll. 431-32). MacDonald’s review of this poem highlights the pathos that Browning achieves through his comic style and underscores the poet’s theology of immanence.

In this regard, MacDonald’s remarks on “Christmas-Eve” align with what he outlines in his letters and portrays in *Phantastes*. Commenting on Browning’s poem, MacDonald declares, “the only proof of Christ’s divinity is his humanity. Because his humanity is not comprehended, his divinity is doubted; and while the former is uncomprehended, an assent to the latter is of little avail” (“Browning’s ‘Christmas-Eve’ 267). He had expressed this point even more boldly in an earlier letter to his father,

insisting, “the first thing is to know Jesus as a man, and any theory about him that makes less of him as a man—with the foolish notion of exalting his divinity—I refuse at once.” Indeed, he goes so far as to claim, “far rather would I be such a Unitarian as Dr. Channing than such a Christian as by far the greatest number of those that talk about his Divinity are” (*An Expression* 60).<sup>113</sup> MacDonald emphatically discards ecclesiastical classifications in favour of understanding divinity as active human love, rather like both of the Brownings. Where *A Drama of Exile* evokes Philippians 2 to advance a kenotic Christology in response to the problem of suffering, *Phantastes* advances a relational theology that clarifies Anodos’ experiences of desire. Over the course of his journey in fairyland, he learns to bring his own poetry into accord with an indwelling divine music.

#### **“Divine Harmonies Within”: Tuning the Music of the Heart**

Throughout *Phantastes*, the emotional and spiritual maturation of Anodos becomes measured through his songs. Taken together, the story’s embedded poems anticipate MacDonald’s later assertion that “the end of the imagination is *harmony*.” As his later essay explains, harmony arises from being in tune with “the divine order of things” as well as with the “divine harmonies within” every individual, who constitutes a “microcosm” of “a mighty macrocosm” (“The Imagination” 35-36). *Phantastes* uses notably similar language to describe Anodos’ intuitive faculties. When Anodos yields to the disguised Alder maid, he notes that, despite her pleasing appearance, something in the sound of her voice “did not vibrate harmoniously with the beat of [his] inward music” (45). Much like the songs of the Eden and Earth spirits in EBB’s *A Drama of Exile*,

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<sup>113</sup> MacDonald refers to Dr. William Ellery Channing (1780–1842), an American Unitarian preacher and abolitionist. For a thoughtful discussion of how Channing’s ideas about the Christian tradition of *imitatio Christi* (the imitation of Christ) influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson, see Emily J. Dumler-Winckler (511-525).

which emphasize that wisdom depends not on superior sight but on hearkening to creation's many voices, MacDonald's concept of harmony depends on receptivity to an indwelling divine presence. The music of *Phantastes* thus exhorts readers to an openness guided by intuition, at the same time that this music also calls attention to that which exceeds translation into language. MacDonald's embedded poems play at the boundary between sense and nonsense, underscoring the limits of rational thought as they attempt to express the inexpressible.<sup>114</sup>

These uses of poetry and music become apparent not long after Anodos enters fairyland. The lighthearted rhymes of the flower fairies prompt him to comment on "these frolicsome creatures" and to express his wish that his readers could experience them directly (21). Moreover, the first of the story's love poems is described by Anodos as a "strange sweet song" that he can neither fully understand nor put into words (30). In this episode, Anodos finds momentary sanctuary from the Ash and the Alder in the shelter of a Beech, who appears to be partly a woman and partly a tree. Protecting Anodos during a storm, she sings to him lines that Anodos says "left in him a feeling like this":

I saw thee ne'er before;  
I see thee never more;  
But love, and help, and pain, beautiful one,  
Have made thee mine, till all my years are done. (30)

Anodos reflects that he "cannot put more of it into words," yet the Beech tree's enigmatic lines about her encounter with Anodos foreshadow the longing for the white lady that

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<sup>114</sup> MacDonald uses poetry to similar ends in his children's fairy stories *At the Back of the North Wind* and *The Princess and the Goblin*, where embedded nonsense verses highlight the limitations of what is generally regarded as "sense."

causes him to expend many words. As Anodos soon discovers, a momentary meeting can produce a lasting longing; moreover, his own experiences with “love, and help, and pain” ultimately prompt him to reconsider what it means to call one’s beloved “mine.”

Not long after Anodos leaves the Beech, he discovers the marble statue of the white lady and sings a series of lyrics that show both his passion’s intensification and his gradual progress toward a more mature understanding of love (37). As if attempting to penetrate the dreams of this “vainly sleeping” woman, he progresses from the gentle exhortation, “Hear my voice come through the golden / Mist of memory and hope” to the desperate imperative, “Awake! or I shall perish here; / And thou be never more alone, / My form and I for ages near” (39). When he rediscovers the statue in the Fairy Palace, his song reaches new heights of sensual imagery; however, the motif of dying from unrequited desire resurfaces. His rapturous catalogue of the woman’s beauty from feet to forehead eventuates in exclamations: “with inward gazes, / I may look till I am lost” and “Woman, ah! thou art victorious / And I perish, overfond” (122). Whether death here is understood literally or figuratively, his focus remains on his own satisfaction.

His tune changes, however, following his expulsion from the fairy palace and his silencing of the goblins. Chastening himself for his relentless gaze and forcible seizure of the lady’s hand, he sings, “In thy lady’s gracious eyes / Look not thou too long” and “Come not thou too near the maid, / Clasp her not too wild” (130). Even as these rebukes warn against intemperance, Anodos reframes his very experience of desire. In another song that addresses by turns the lady, the “worthier” knight, and his own heart, he resolves, “If a nobler waits for thee, / I will weep aside” (129). At the same time that he relinquishes the dream of being with her, he assures himself, “to yield it lovingly / Is a

something still” (129). This renewed understanding of love accords with the song the old woman in the cottage sings to him when he confronts this hypothetical idea as a reality.

Through its blend of ecstasy, grief, and resolution, the old woman’s song integrates the conflicting elements of various earlier poems into a harmonious, if paradoxical, whole:

O light of dead and of dying days!  
 O Love! in thy glory go,  
 In a rosy mist and a moony maze,  
 O’er the pathless peaks of snow.  
 But what is left for the cold grey soul,  
 That moans like a wounded dove?  
 One wine is left in the broken bowl—  
 ‘Tis—*To love, and love, and love.* (150)

While the first quatrain recalls the images of desire and death that infuse Anodos’ earlier songs, the second quatrain transfigures loss and mortality into an urgent generosity. Evoking Ecclesiastes 12:6, with its exhortation to remember the Creator “before the golden bowl be broken,” the line “One wine is left in the broken bowl” finds joy, even pleasure, in pain as long as active love remains possible. Further lines similarly echo the images and patterns of biblical wisdom poetry:

Better to sit at the waters’ birth,  
 Than a sea of waves to win;  
 To live in the love that floweth forth  
 Than the love that cometh in. (150)

The “better . . . than” structure recalls the inverted parallelism used in the Book of Proverbs to establish memorable contrasts.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, the metaphor of love as an uncontainable sea, experienced more fully in giving than in taking, recalls Song of Solomon 8:8 (“Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would be utterly contemned”). These allusions underscore MacDonald’s efforts to unify soulful and sensual experiences.

Even as *Phantastes* uses poetry to convey ideas not easily rendered into prose, Anodos’ maturation occurs as much through silence as through song. His reflections about waiting for “the power of song” suggest a dialectical pattern of declaration and denial: he tells readers that it is “only in the silence and darkness of the soul’s night” that celestial music can “shine upon the conscious spirit” (118). The phrase “the silence and darkness of the soul’s night” evokes the darkness of unknowing (*agnosia*) associated with the apophatic (negative) method of Dionysius the Areopagite, whereby the unknowing of God occurs through the stripping away of all preconceptions and illusions.<sup>116</sup> Far from an inversion of kataphatic (affirmative) theology, apophatic theology aims to move beyond both affirmation and negation, demonstrating that divine things exceed human knowledge. MacDonald himself outlines this unknowing most plainly in his first series of *Unspoken Sermons* (1867), where his address on “The Higher Faith” praises “the faith of ignorant but hoping children, who know that they do not know” (65). Within

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<sup>115</sup> Examples include “Better *it is to be* of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud” and “Better *is* a little with righteousness than great revenues without right” (Proverbs 16:8, 19).

<sup>116</sup> See Paul Rorem’s commentary on the imagery of light and darkness in Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*, which comprises Greek texts that first appeared in BCE 525 (3-8). See also Jean-Luc Marion’s discussion of how the negative theology practiced by mystics including both Dionysius and Nicholas of Cusa leads toward a “third way” that points “beyond the oppositions between affirmation and negation” (*In Excess* 132-38).

MacDonald's nineteenth-century context, these theological traditions found a resurgence in the "doctrine of nescience" advanced by Sir William Hamilton, whereby learned ignorance constitutes the height of wisdom.<sup>117</sup> What is at stake, then, is less negation than reorientation—that is, the progression from worldly wisdom to the divine foolishness epitomized in the incarnation. Through intertwining song and silence, MacDonald shifts the emphasis from knowledge to action. His essay on "The Imagination" identifies the end of the imagination as harmony and the end of harmony, in turn, as "*being good*," which he defines not as following "any formula or any creed" but as becoming patterned after "him who did the will of his father in heaven" (36). In much the same way, the poems of *Phantastes* do not offer the final word on Anodos' spiritual growth: they are but the prelude that rouses him to translate love and wisdom into action.

#### **"Something Worth Doing": *Phantastes* and the Wisdom of Application**

Tellingly, the final words of the old woman to Anodos as he leaves the cottage are "Go, my son, and do something worth doing" (154). His next adventures in fighting alongside the two princes and defeating the giants manifest both courage and fellowship, yet his preoccupation with the worthiness gained through the honour of knighthood leads once again to his downfall. Imprisoned by his Shadow in a high tower, Anodos is startled by "the sound of a woman singing," which he likens to "a living soul" and "an incarnation of Nature" that shows him the way out of prison. His rescuer identifies herself as the one whose globe he had broken, declaring that she owes him "many thanks for breaking it" because in the loss of her musical globe she has found the ability to sing.

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<sup>117</sup> See Ralph Jessop's discussion of Hamilton's article "The Philosophy of the Unconditioned," published in 1829 in the *Edinburgh Review*, and its influence on Carlyle (30-42, 100-3).

Moreover, she delights that, wherever she goes, her songs “do good, and deliver people” (173-74). Through this surprising reversal, the young woman becomes much more than the mere object of Anodos’ sexual curiosity, as the former incident with the globe might have by itself suggested. Rather like Anodos and like Cosmo, she too moves away from a fetishistic preoccupation with an idealized object (her globe) and toward the integration of this ideal within herself.

As Anodos beholds “the face of the child, glorified in the countenance of the woman,” this moment of recognition causes him to feel “ashamed and humbled”; at the same time, this meeting lifts “a great weight” from him and initiates further inward liberation (176). His subsequent musings to himself reveal a newfound concern with his own integrity. Resolving to count himself a squire rather than a knight, Anodos surmises, “he that will be a hero, will barely be a man,” whereas “he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood” (176). His resolution to be a “doer of his work” indicates that he has made action the test of character, much as the Book of James emphasizes that right interpretation consists in being “doers of the word” (1:22). Understanding how to see himself in the stories he encounters, Anodos faces his shortcomings and, in so doing, amends them. At the very moment that he realizes, “I have failed . . . I have lost myself,” he discovers, “it was not myself, but only my shadow, that I had lost” (176). He further reflects, “my ideal soon became my life; whereas, formerly, my life had consisted in a vain attempt to behold, if not my ideal in myself, at least myself in my ideal” (176). In contradistinction to his former solipsistic efforts to see himself in his ideal, Anodos ultimately experiences a dynamic crossing from ideal to life.

MacDonald emphasizes the ongoing nature of this transformation in the final chapter of *Phantastes*, where Anodos returns to his own world still unsure about the task of application. He asks himself, “Could I translate the experience of my travels there, into common life? . . . Or must I live it all over again, and learn it all over again, in the other forms that belong to the world of men?” (194). In effect, the question facing Anodos is the same as the question facing the reader—that is, how one might “translate” the experiences gained through reading into practical wisdom. Rather than end his fairy tale with a moralistic exhortation, MacDonald shows that no tidy didactic principle will suffice. This episodic journey of character formation thus accords with Coleridge’s affirmation in *Aids to Reflection* that “Christianity is not Theory, or a Speculation; but a *Life*. Not a *Philosophy* of Life, but a Life and a living Process” (*Collected Works* 9.202). For Coleridge, as for MacDonald, spiritual growth cannot be reduced to a formula.

MacDonald’s resistance to religious dictums is in keeping with his reservations with ecclesiastical categories. Not long after his resignation from the pastorate in Arundel, he wrote in a letter to his father, “I have no love for *any* sect of Christians as such—as little for Independents as any” (qtd. in Greville MacDonald 197). His hesitations to identify with any particular religious group put him in the company of EBB, who similarly described herself as “a believer in a Universal Christianity” (*BC* 9:119). Both EBB and MacDonald might, given their firm Christocentric convictions, be regarded as standing at a far remove from the agnostic George Eliot, whose translations of Strauss and Feuerbach brought to Victorian audiences the historical criticism that challenged belief in Jesus’ divinity. Yet these theological differences coexist with their shared creative recovery of wisdom literature to question unthinking religious platitudes.

Indeed, the common ground between MacDonald and Eliot was apparent to Victorian readers. In “A Word to George Eliot and George MacDonald” (1875), the conservative Christian reviewer George McCrie denounced both writers for attempting “to undermine evangelical religion”: he identified MacDonald as “belonging to the same school” as Eliot and claimed that the caricatures of Calvinism in both of their novels demonstrate “an insidious strain of heresy” (294, 295, 308).<sup>118</sup> As the next chapter will show, the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual quest of Eliot’s heroine in *Romola* (1862–63) likewise depends on a process of searching that exceeds the boundaries of religious institutions.

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<sup>118</sup> This essay appears in the volume *The Religion of Our Literature* (published by Hodder and Stoughton), where McCrie denounces writers from Carlyle to Browning to Tennyson and praises Longfellow. His discussion of Eliot and MacDonald compares Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (1866) to MacDonald’s realist novels *David Elginbrod* (1863) and *Alec Forbes* (1865).

### Chapter 3: Wisdom's Turn: Widening "God's Kingdom" and Re-Reading Parable in George Eliot's *Romola*

According to many scholars of Victorian literature, George Eliot's rejection of Christianity underpinned her own work as a translator, journalist, and novelist; moreover, her turn away from Christianity has been seen as typifying the nineteenth century's growing disenchantment with religious belief. As J. Russell Perkin puts it, the account of how the pious Mary Anne Evans became the agnostic George Eliot has long been regarded as "one of the paradigmatic Victorian loss-of-faith stories" (142). On first glance, Eliot's movement away from her Anglican upbringing and distancing herself from the Evangelical fervour sparked by her teacher Maria Lewis, along with her subsequent progression toward a kind of liberal humanism, seem easy enough to trace. Studies of her life and writing frequently call attention to the events that shaped this progression, including her refusal to attend church, her reading of the higher criticism, her editorial work for the radical *Westminster Review*, and her unconventional relationship with George Henry Lewes.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, the very complexity of language that literary scholars use to describe Eliot's novelistic representations of Christianity suggests a highly nuanced trajectory. Felicia Bonaparte characterizes her fiction as advancing "a secular but transcendent religion," while Simon During observes that in Eliot's novels "the secular productively re-secularizes the non-secular and vice-versa"

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<sup>119</sup> These events are laid out in useful detail, for example, in the "Chronology" that prefaces the recent second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (2019), edited by George Levine and Nancy Henry (vii-viii). Many biographical studies of Eliot have been undertaken since the mid-twentieth century, from Gordon S. Haight's pioneering *George Eliot: A Biography* (1968) to Rosemary Ashton's *George Eliot: A Life* (1996) to more recent work including Barbara Hardy's *George Eliot: A Critic's Biography* (2006) and Nancy Henry's *Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography* (2012).

(433). In clearer terms, Charles LaPorte observes that Eliot's "most characteristic literary uses of the Bible do not lend themselves to the simple view of secularization," a view that he explains as the widespread diminishing of the Bible's cultural importance ("George Eliot" 356). The dense and paradoxical expressions employed by critics reflect not only the complexity of Eliot's thought but also the extensive debates regarding the fraught word *secular*, surveyed briefly in my introduction. Even as this chapter marks a turn in my study from writers who self-identified as Christians (EBB and MacDonald) to writers who distanced themselves from Christianity (Eliot, Ruskin, and Schreiner), my analysis calls into question the dichotomous classifications that have been habitually used to demarcate "religious" as opposed to "irreligious" writers. As I argue, Eliot's creative participation in the higher critical project of reframing biblical revelation invites a nuanced understanding of religious discourse in general, wisdom literature in particular.

Eliot's profound investment in biblical higher criticism is immediately evident in her English translations of David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (*The Life of Jesus*) (1846) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen Des Christentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*) (1854), which brought these controversial works of German scholarship to Victorian British readers.<sup>120</sup> Her subsequent novels reveal her responses to higher critical interpretive debates in more subtle but no less significant ways. Arguably, her clearest fictional representation of scholarly attempts to re-examine sacred texts occurs in

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<sup>120</sup> *Das Leben Jesu* was originally published in 1835, while *Das Wesen Des Christentums* appeared in 1841. As will be discussed later in this chapter, these German books circulated in Britain prior to Eliot's translation, though among a more limited audience. Both of Eliot's translations were published by John Chapman; her translation of Feuerbach was the only one of her publications to bear the name "Marian Evans." Born Mary Anne Evans, she began spelling her name "Mary Ann Evans" in 1836, following her mother's death; after she became assistant editor of the *Westminster Review* in 1851, she used "Marian Evans." The pseudonym "George Eliot" first appeared with the publication of *Scenes from Clerical Life* (1857) by John Blackwood. See Rosemarie Bodenheimer's discussion of these monikers in "A Woman of Many Names" (19-36).

*Middlemarch* (1871–72)—specifically, in the Reverend Edward Causabon’s attempt to write a “Key to all Mythologies” (54). This novel’s setting in the early 1830s predates the heyday of higher critical debates in Britain, but Causabon clearly participates in the early forays into comparative mythology that John Kendrick identified in his 1827 essay for the *Monthly Repository* as continuous with the higher criticism, as discussed in my introduction. Eliot portrays Causabon with her characteristic blend of satire and sympathy, yet *Middlemarch* ultimately demonstrates the futility of any effort to impose a single, unified meaning-making schema upon mythic or symbolical stories.

Without directly portraying the kind of textual study that Causabon undertakes in *Middlemarch*, Eliot’s earlier novel *Romola* (1862–63) explores similar hermeneutic challenges through its fictional representation of Renaissance Florence, with the figure of Romola as a seeker of wisdom—not a scholar, like Casubon—at its centre. Published in monthly installments in the *Cornhill Magazine* (July 1862 to August 1863), *Romola* is itself an effort at historical and mythological recovery, one that shows the collision of classical and Christian cultures.<sup>121</sup> This novel takes place in Florence from 1492 to 1498, the years that span the death of Lorenzo de’ Medici, ruler of Florence and enthusiastic

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<sup>121</sup> *Romola* is unique among Eliot’s oeuvre in several respects: of all her works of fiction, this is the only one published in the *Cornhill Magazine*, the only one illustrated in its initial issue, and the only one set outside Britain. All of Eliot’s other novels were published by John Blackwood, but she was persuaded to serialize *Romola* in the *Cornhill Magazine* because of the lucrative offer made by publisher George Smith. Hoping to boost the declining sales of his magazine, he offered Eliot the unprecedented sum of £10,000 for her historical novel, an amount that became £7,000 after negotiations about length. Smith further arranged for the artist Frederic Leighton of the Royal Academy to illustrate *Romola*. Leighton’s knowledge of Florence and previous work on the Italian Renaissance made him a fitting choice as illustrator. Following the end of the novel’s serial run, a three-volume edition was released by Smith, Elder, and Company, though this edition did not retain the illustrations (see Haight 356–57). All of my quotations from the primary text come from the 2005 edition of this novel edited by Dorothea Barrett and published by Penguin Classics. This edition is the only scholarly text of this novel published since Andrew Brown’s 1993 edition for Oxford World Classics. Neither of these editions include Leighton’s illustrations. While both the illustrations and the monthly installments significantly inform the serialized *Romola*, I have chosen to omit these features from my analysis. My approach foregrounds Eliot’s participation in the interpretive debates and generic forms that underpin my larger study, albeit at the cost of examining the distinctive features of the serialized novel.

patron of the classical arts, and the execution of Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican friar, self-proclaimed prophet, and religious reformer who governed Florence as a puritanical and popular republic for three years before church and civil authorities turned against him. This historical backdrop brings into sharp relief the combination of classical and Christian ideals that become embodied by Eliot's eponymous heroine. Romola, whose very name evokes the founder of Rome, is "the daughter of a classical scholar, married to a pagan god, instructed by a prophet, and mythologized as the Madonna Antigone," to quote David Carroll's apt description (*George Eliot* 197).<sup>122</sup> When the novel begins, readers find Romola in the library of her aging father, the blind classical scholar Bardo de' Bardi, whom she serves as amanuensis; she later marries Tito Melema, a Greek scholar who is repeatedly described in Bacchic terms. After she learns that Tito has betrayed her father's dying wishes by selling the contents of his library, which he had intended to bestow as a gift to the city of Florence, Romola attempts to leave Florence only to be interrupted by a warning from Savonarola. Romola heeds his words and goes back to the city, yet her obedience coexists with growing reservations about his authority and lingering affirmations of her classical values. In effect, the final epiphanies of Eliot's protagonist anticipate the idea later developed in *Middlemarch*—namely, that there is no secure, authoritative code for deciphering textual meaning or finding order within history.

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<sup>122</sup> Citing a statement by Eliot to Alexander Main that he had correctly assumed her heroine's name to be a derivative of the Latin *Romulus*, Felicia Bonaparte argues that this name encapsulates the novel's melding of classicism and Christianity: she observes, "it was in Rome that Greece survived and Christianity flourished" (*The Triptych* 20). Notably, Haight offers an alternative reading of *Romola*, claiming that it is "not a Christian but a place name," tracing it to a hamlet on a hill south-west of Florence near Certosa (356). While the immediate association of *Romola* with *Romulus* is inescapable, Haight's interpretation is suggestive in light of this novel's narrative trajectory: it is through her experiences in a small village outside Florence, which the novel never identifies by name, that Romola finds self-understanding, as the following pages will show.

Romola achieves this understanding, however, not as a scholar of mythology but as one whose searching takes her beyond the confines of academic and religious institutions.

The expansive trajectory of her search becomes evident in the series of dramatic encounters between Romola and Savonarola that unfold throughout the novel. Although each of these incidents seems at first to be either a potential conversion scene or a potential moment of apostasy, Romola neither becomes Savonarola's disciple nor rejects his Catholicism altogether. She first meets Savonarola in the presence of her dying brother Dino, a Dominican monk who issues a prophetic warning against Romola's upcoming marriage to Tito and commands her to dedicate herself to Christianity. She does not heed her brother's words but nevertheless finds something compelling in the religious devotion that she witnesses. After her husband betrays her, Romola flees from Florence only to meet Savonarola on the road: in similarly authoritarian terms, he declares that he has been given a divine mandate to recall her to the city. She complies, but her obedience coexists with rebellious thoughts that build to a crescendo in their final meeting. During a heated argument, Romola rejects Savonarola's political and religious vision. Declaring that "God's kingdom is something wider" than Savonarola recognizes, she departs from Florence, only to return once again after subsequent events prompt her to realize the limitations of her own claims (492). Rather than a story of faith lost or found, Eliot's novel depicts Romola's incremental steps toward a wisdom that resides not in making or responding to absolute pronouncements but in the capacity to question.

As this brief plot summary indicates, this novel is ambitious in its historical and intellectual scope—so much so that it has frustrated many readers. Eliot scholars have long drawn attention to the vexed reception history of *Romola*, a novel that has been

repeatedly characterized as a failure.<sup>123</sup> Many of Eliot's initial readers objected to the story's dense erudition and remote setting as unlike her previous portraits of rural or small-town British life; however, as some of her more thoughtful contemporaries highlighted, the cultural tensions that emerge in her Renaissance Florence have striking parallels to ideological clashes evident in Victorian Britain. In an unsigned review for the *Spectator*, R. H. Hutton pointed out that, even though Eliot's detailed portraits of Florentine life were oddities to the average British reader, "the conflict between liberal culture and the more passionate form of the Christian faith in that strange era . . . has so many points of resemblance with the present" (200). While Hutton's statement could be applied to the Victorian era in the broadest of terms, the conflict he identifies found a significant expression in the debates surrounding the spread of the higher criticism in the early 1860s, when *Romola* was composed and published. This chapter contextualizes *Romola* in relation to the biblical scholarship that Eliot translated, as well as to related ideas from the controversial and jointly authored *Essays and Reviews* (1860). In so doing, I show that the novel re-examines the concept of prophetic authority and invites readers to reconsider the experience of religious revelation vis-à-vis the form of the parable.

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<sup>123</sup> In 1979, Bonaparte opened her monograph on this novel by quoting George Henry Lewes's statement that *Romola* was met with "a universal howl of discontent" (*The Triptych* 1); writing in 2008, Nancy Henry highlighted the continuation of this trend by remarking that *Romola* remains Eliot's "least read novel" (*The Cambridge Introduction* 73). More focused reception studies, however, have complicated this picture: Carol A. Martin observes that *Romola* received several positive reviews, including those published by the *Reader*, the *Examiner*, and the *Evening Courant* (137–53). Eliot herself expressed some indifference regarding the novel's relative unpopularity, telling her friend Sara Sophia Hennell that she never meant *Romola* to appeal to the masses and declaring that she had received "a great deal of pretty encouragement from some immense big-wigs, some of them saying *Romola* is the finest book they ever read" (*The George Eliot Letters* 2: 349). Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner propose an alternative method of reading this notoriously challenging novel in their discussion of *Romola* as a "problem text": they adopt a post-structuralist methodology to make the case for a "pluralist criticism" that goes beyond "the author function" (2). My own reassessment of *Romola*, by contrast, resituates both author and text in relation to nineteenth-century hermeneutic debates.

Building on recent criticism that finds esteem and even reverence for biblical texts in Eliot's novels, including the work of Peter C. Hodgson, John H. Mazaheri, and Marilyn Orr, I show that *Romola* incorporates not only the content but also the structure of biblical parables.<sup>124</sup> At several signal moments, the novel makes recourse to the religious and political language of "God's Kingdom" or "the kingdom of God" (492, 549), which is explicitly identified as the subject of many parables in the Gospels. Furthermore, Eliot adapts the parable's narrative form in the two chapters that comprise Romola's second departure from Florence, where the protagonist enters into her fullest understanding of this kingdom. In this sequence, Romola journeys to an unnamed, plague-stricken village and cares for its inhabitants for several months, an experience that awakens within her a renewed commitment to charitable action in Florence. This incident differs markedly in mimetic mode from her otherwise densely detailed historical novel. As Eliot explained in a letter to her friend Sara Sophia Hennell a few months after *Romola* completed its serial run, these chapters "belonged to [her] earliest vision of the story and were by deliberate forecast adopted as romantic and symbolic elements" (*The George Eliot Letters* 4: 104).<sup>125</sup> While this sequence is not demarcated as plainly as is MacDonald's interpolated narrative in *Phantastes*, the shift in mimetic mode has an

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<sup>124</sup> Hodgson argues that Eliot's novels "move through and beyond evangelicalism and [Auguste Comte's] religion of humanity towards something new," which Hodgson sees as a kind of process theology *avant la lettre*: Eliot anticipates the ideas of a dynamic, emergent divinity later developed by thinkers like Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne (13-14). Similarly, Orr draws attention to Eliot's progression "beyond Feuerbachian humanism" and toward "an antidoctrinal form of Christianity" (453, 463). Mazaheri's recent study argues that, for Eliot, "loss of religion need not entail loss of faith" (*Essays* 3). My analysis focuses on how the specific form of the parable enables Eliot to create and sustain this flexible, dynamic approach to the Christian religion.

<sup>125</sup> All quotations from Eliot's letters come from the nine-volume collection *The George Eliot Letters*, edited by Haight. They are hereafter abbreviated as *GEL*.

effect akin to that of embedding a story within a story. Moreover, these chapters' didactic function aligns with the parable's distinctive features as a mode of moral teaching.

To unfold Eliot's adaptation of parable in *Romola*, I draw from insights into the Gospel parables offered by the higher critics that Eliot read, as well as those of twenty-first century biblical and literary scholars. In particular, my reading draws from and extends Susan E. Colón's account of the extra-biblical parables that appear in Victorian literature.<sup>126</sup> Developing Paul Ricoeur's argument that biblical parables are characterized by their "interrogative structure" ("Biblical Hermeneutics" 33), Colón argues that parables stage "a gap between everyday human experience and a gesture of extravagance that points to human limit-experience" (16). Parables, then, require audiences to discern and respond to this gap: they depend on what Colón calls "the embodied response of the reader" (16). Eliot's symbolical sequence in *Romola* displays the questioning energy, the gesture of extravagance, and the confrontational qualities that Colón highlights. Unlike Dino and Savonarola's oracular pronouncements, *Romola*'s reflections on her experiences in the unnamed village consist of unanswered questions. What *Romola* learns, then, exceeds Savonarola's command to cultivate "the wisdom that has hitherto been as foolishness to [her]"—a statement that echoes the Pauline statement that contrasts the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world (1 Corinthians 1:18-28). More profoundly, she discovers the wisdom of interrogating her own wisdom.

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<sup>126</sup> Colón's book is one of several recent studies that call attention to Victorian revivals and transformations of biblical parables. Other related scholarship includes Linda M. Lewis's *Dickens, His Parables, and His Reader* (U of Missouri P, 2011), as well as articles on Dickens by Jennifer Gribble (*Literature and Theology* vol. 18 no. 4, 2014, pp. 427-41) and Rodney Stenning Edgecombe (*Dickens Quarterly* vol. 33 no. 2, 2016, pp. 109-24). See also recent work on Elizabeth Gaskell by Amy Coté (*Victorian Review* vol. 40 no. 1, 2014, pp. 59-76) and Elizabeth Ludlow (*Victorian Review* vol. 42 no. 1, 2016, pp. 107-125).

In what follows, I demonstrate that the interpretive dilemmas explored in Eliot's fifteenth-century Florence participate in and contribute to the hermeneutic debates of nineteenth-century Britain. Even as Eliot advocated the historical criticism that challenged the divinity of Jesus and questioned the authority of the Gospels, she also suggested that biblical texts might be productively remythologized and revitalized. *Romola*, the novel that Eliot described as being "written with her best blood" (*GEL* 6: 335), epitomizes this interpretive and creative work. Departing from the habit of reading *Romola* as an allegory of Auguste Comte's theory of positivism, I suggest that this novel ultimately calls into question tidy methodological and interpretive schemas, positivism included. Eliot's critical yet compassionate portrayal of Savonarola reveals at once her reservations about religious institutions and her attraction to Christian concepts of fellowship. Furthermore, her representation of Savonarola displays her hesitations regarding the prophetic paradigm that has come to typify criticism on Victorian sage writing. Like the other writers in my study, Eliot reframes religious revelation in ways that depart from the established paradigm of Victorian sage discourse. Her mode of creative interpretation owes less to typological exegesis than to the higher criticism, less to prophecy than to wisdom literature, and less to rhetorical persuasion than to poetic exploration. By adapting the narrative strategy of the parable, she conceptualizes religious revelation not as a static proclamation but as a participatory experience, one that demands the reader's embodied response.

### **Eliot and the Limits of Positivist Allegory: "From Picture to Diagram"**

Eliot's emphasis on interpretive dilemmas throughout *Romola* becomes evident both in the novel's plot and in its narrative commentary. Midway through the story's

action, Eliot's narrator reflects that the "path of life" seldom brings a "clear message" from a "radiant angel." Instead, the way forward can be discerned only by relying on the "helping hands" of those who themselves "stumbled and saw dimly" (324). This metaphor recalls the pathways motif that recurs throughout the chivalric quest narrative of MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858), yet Eliot's realist novel exhibits greater reservations about where—or even whether—wisdom can be found. Whereas MacDonald explores a productive doubt that requires readers to seek guidance from their intuitive sense of divine wisdom, Eliot sustains a heightened degree of skepticism regarding all potential sources of light. Even so, she, like MacDonald, portrays hermeneutic challenges as creative opportunities: for Eliot, uncertainty becomes an occasion for self-examination and transformation. Such turning inward must, however, be undertaken without depending on those whom Eliot's narrator calls "men who believed falsities as well as truths" (324). In this novel, all seeming authorities are fallible.

Even though the narrator cautions against looking for a single and stable interpretive code, a distinctive trend has emerged within twentieth- and twenty-first century criticism on this novel, much of which reads it as an illustration of Comtean positivism. Following J. B. Bullen's influential argument in 1975 that *Romola* is a "positivist allegory" (425), subsequent studies including work by Bonaparte (*The Triptych*), Mary Wilson Carpenter (*George Eliot* 74), and Andrew Thompson (68) identify the novel as dramatizing Comte's three stages of cultural and individual development (the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive).<sup>127</sup> Otherwise known as

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<sup>127</sup> For a thorough overview of positivism and its impact on Victorian intellectuals from John Stuart Mill to Thomas Hardy to George Eliot, see T. W. Wright's *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge UP, 1986). Wright devotes a section of his book to discussing

the “Religion of Humanity,” Comte’s philosophy systematized ideas derived from Henri de Saint-Simon: optimistic about the collective progress of humankind, positivism sought to re-organize society on the basis of scientific empiricism. As a lens through which to read *Romola*, positivism has many attractions. Comte’s theories held substantial cultural currency among nineteenth-century British intellectuals, especially in the years following Harriet Martineau’s 1853 translation of the six-volume *Cours de philosophie positive* (*Course of Positive Philosophy*) (1830–1842). Eliot’s own knowledge of and favourable disposition toward positivism further strengthen this case: she wrote an appreciative essay on Comte for the *Leader* in 1854, and her poem “O May I Join the Choir Invisible” (1874) was used by Comte’s disciple Richard Congreve in positivist services, as T. R. Wright observes (173-76). More specifically, Bonaparte notes that Eliot read Comte’s account of the Middle Ages while researching *Romola* (*The Triptych* 58). Nevertheless, several incidents in *Romola* caution against drawing too schematic a connection between Eliot’s story and Comte’s theory. Even as the novel draws on positivistic images and themes, it ultimately shows Eliot’s disenchantment with systematic accounts of history and claims to knowledge.

One of the most striking of these skeptical scenes occurs early in the novel, when readers are introduced to Tito Milema, the “shipwrecked stranger” who appears charming but proves untrustworthy. Upon his arrival in Florence, Tito visits the shop of the barber Nello and offers an elaborate interpretation of a sketch drawn by Piero di Cosimo, a historical figure who appears as a minor character in Eliot’s novel. This sketch features a

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Eliot and positivism (173-201). See also Suzy Anger’s “George Eliot and Philosophy,” which considers both Eliot’s admiration for Comte’s theories and Eliot’s points of difference from positivism (215-35).

suggestive combination of classical and Christian images, which various critics have seen as indicative of Eliot's positivistic schema. Bonaparte, for instance, calls the sketch "pictorial prophecy," arguing that its various figures anticipate the characters who will influence Romola's ethical development, which she then outlines according to Comte's three stages of moral evolution (*The Triptych* 34, 36). Similarly, Carpenter regards this piece as emblematic of "the four-part division of Romola's spiritual progress," as well as "the Comtean structure of history" (64). While these readings offer useful guides for the chapters to follow, they miss the ironic possibility that to approach *Romola* in this fashion is to replicate the reading practices of Tito, whom Eliot portrays as unreliable in the extreme. Attractive yet deceitful and morally corrupt, Tito routinely seeks his own pleasure: he abandons his foster father to secure a place for himself in Florence and wins the hand of Romola, all the while beguiling the peasant maid Tessa into thinking that they are married and fathering two children with her. Rather than advancing an interpretive code, then, the scene where the corrupt and unreliable Tito beholds Piero's sketch provides an example of how *not* to read.

The four figures in this sketch invite philosophical speculation, but Eliot's narrator clearly ironizes Tito's pretentious attempts to decipher Piero's images:

The sketch Nello pointed to represented three masks—one a drunken, laughing Satyr, another a sorrowing Magdalen, and the third, which lay between them, the rigid, cold face of a Stoic: the masks rested obliquely on the lap of a little child, whose cherub features rose above them with something of the supernal promise in the gaze which painters had by that time learned to give to the Divine Infant.

"A symbolical picture, I see," said the young Greek, touching the lute while he spoke, so as to bring out a slight musical murmur. "The child, perhaps, is the Golden Age, wanting neither worship nor philosophy. And the Golden Age can always come back as long as men are born in the form of babies, and don't come into the world in a cassock or furred mantle. Or, the child may mean the wise philosophy of Epicurus, removed alike from the gross, the sad, and the severe." (34)

Tito's two proposed readings of a mere "sketch," which the artist Piero never developed into a full painting, assign an abstract significance to this "symbolical picture" that has little to do with its material form. By drawing attention to Tito's calculated efforts to charm his auditor through his skill with the lute, Eliot highlights his ostentatious posturing. Furthermore, this reading occurs only a few moments after Tito has coldly dismissed the Gothic beauty of the Florentine Duomo, the cathedral designed by Giotto di Bondone in the fourteenth century. Whereas the narrator appreciates the cathedral's "harmonious variety of colour and form" as an indication "that human life must somehow and some time shape itself into accord with that aspiring beauty," Tito responds to the architecture with "a slight touch of scorn on his lip" and a "scanning coolness" from his eyes (32). Tito's evaluations as an artistic critic, then, seem dubious at best.

Given the narrator's repeated insistence on the limits of all interpretations, the primary challenge offered by this scene in the barber shop is not to better Tito's reading of the sketch but to resist the lure of such reductive reading strategies. Far from a positivistic *roman à clef*, Eliot's novel suggests that there is no "Key to all Mythologies," to evoke the phrase used in her later *Middlemarch* (54). Instead of advancing a positivist trajectory toward progress and completion, she leaves many of the novel's interpretive dilemmas markedly—and, what is more, productively—unresolved. This irresolution demonstrates her commitment to an artistic mode that cannot be reduced to systematic methods. As Eliot suggested in a letter to Frederic Harrison dated 15 August 1866, literature requires a significant degree of intricacy if it is to achieve its fullest didactic power: "aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic—if it lapses anywhere from the

picture to the diagram—it becomes the most offensive of all teachings” (*GEL* 4: 300). Her words against lapsing from the picture to the diagram warn against reading her novels schematically, even in the case of a philosophy that she elsewhere affirms.

In a similar way, Eliot’s novelistic responses to biblical higher criticism offer more than a tidy application of these hermeneutic insights. Her creative interpretations underscore this criticism’s resistance to literalist ideas about inspiration; at the same time, they reclaim the symbolic power of biblical texts in ways that call into question the commitment to historical recovery that emerges as dominant in several of the higher critics. Eschewing the precision of a rigorous methodology, she advances something much closer to the “twisting pathway of heuristic fiction” that characterizes Ricoeur’s concept of poetics (“Biblical Hermeneutics” 88). Rather than advance a persuasive argument, the mode of discourse that Ricoeur conceptualizes as *rhetoric*, Eliot works in an artistic and exploratory mode. This alternative approach distinguishes her approach to interpretive issues from that offered by other higher critics, even those that she admired. For all her intellectual debt to Feuerbach, Eliot distanced herself from her own translation of *Das Wesen Des Christentums*: shortly after completing this translation, she wrote to Sara Hennell, “With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree, but of course I should, of myself, alter the phraseology considerably” (*GEL* 2: 153).<sup>128</sup> To alter the “phraseology”—in effect, the literary form—is, inescapably, to alter the substance as well. Much like the other writers in my study, Eliot uses insights from higher critical

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<sup>128</sup> Much scholarship emphasizes the influence of Feuerbach’s ideas on Eliot’s novelistic writings. See, for example, Bonaparte (“Carrying” 41), Houston (123), and Paris (25).

scholarship as a means of both disorienting and reorienting readers to biblical texts, re-reading these texts primarily for their literary qualities.

Throughout both her novels and her letters, Eliot not only challenges dogmatic expressions of Christianity but also highlights the artistic elements of biblical texts. During the Christmas season of 1862, while she was in the midst of composing *Romola*, Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell, “What pitiable people those are who feel no poetry in Christianity! Surely the acme of poetry hitherto is the conception of the suffering Messiah—and the final triumph, ‘He shall reign for ever and ever’” (*GEL* 4: 71). These words sound remarkably like Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s impassioned affirmation of “the ongoing development of *the poetry of Christianity*,” discussed in chapter 1 (*BC* 7: 21). Although the translator of *Das Leben Jesu* would not likely have called Strauss “both dull and wicked together” (*BC* 17: 5), as EBB did, Eliot went so far as to report to her friend Caroline Bray that “dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion” in the process of translation made her “Strauss-sick” (*GEL* 1: 206). These lines suggest a pain, even a repugnance, that underscores the complexity of Eliot’s emotional and intellectual stance regarding both the higher criticism and its source texts. In a letter to her father dated shortly after she had announced her refusal to attend church on 2 January 1842, she described her turn away from institutional Christianity in similarly complex terms. Even as she denounced Christianity’s “system of doctrines” as “most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness,” she described biblical texts as “histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction” and further expressed admiration for “the moral teaching of Jesus himself” (*GEL* 1: 128). Her strident critique of Christianity’s “doctrines,” then, should not be understood as distaste for its sacred texts.

Eliot's approach to the Bible as literature can be best appreciated against the backdrop of the higher critical studies that she read and translated: these contexts reveal both her place in nineteenth-century intellectual history and her artistic innovations. Tellingly, the letter to her father quoted above echoes the language used by the Unitarian biblical scholar Charles Hennell, whose *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) significantly influenced Eliot when she read it in the early 1840s.<sup>129</sup> In the preface to the first edition of his volume, Hennell called attention to the artificial and unproductive limitations on biblical scholarship that literal concepts of inspiration had imposed, explaining that "the doctrine of the divine inspiration, or of the unquestionable veracity, of the Gospel writers" had prevented these texts from being analyzed with the more critical recognition that "they may contain a mixture of truth and error" (iv-v). He not only took a skeptical position regarding the veracity of miracles but further claimed that it would be mistaken to think that "the relinquishment of this belief is equivalent to an entire renunciation of the Christian religion" (vi). As Hennell concluded much later in his study, "the moral teaching of Jesus forms the strength of Christianity" (453)—a statement that bears a notable resemblance to Eliot's own words in the letter to her father.

In much the same way that Eliot maintained a sympathetic disposition toward Christianity even after refusing to attend church, many prominent higher critics were not opposed to the Christian religion *per se*. Although biblical scholars such as Strauss and Hennell were widely regarded as opponents of the Christian faith, both of them were

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<sup>129</sup> Eliot's translation of *Das Leben Jesu* took over a project begun by her friend Charles Hennell's wife, Elizabeth, nicknamed "Rufa" (née Brabant). Strauss and Hennell read each other's scholarship and regarded it favorably. As Norman Vance notes, only a few years previously, Strauss had written an enthusiastic preface for the 1839 German edition of Hennell's *Inquiring Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (80).

“trying to maintain an identity that might still be labelled ‘Christian,’” as Timothy Larsen puts it (*Contested Christianity* 46).<sup>130</sup> Larsen further observes that, even within the Unitarian circles that were among the first to welcome higher critical scholarship, there was a distinctive “fault line” between a “biblicist camp” and a “freethinking one” (*Contested Christianity* 44). Just prior to Eliot’s translation, members of this first, more conservative, camp of Unitarians launched a vehement critique of Strauss: J. R. Beard’s edited collection *Voices of the Church in Reply to Dr. D. F. Strauss, Author of ‘Das Leben Jesu,’ Comprising Essays in Defence of Christianity, by Divines of Various Communion* (1845).<sup>131</sup> Among the latter group of Unitarians, the prominent theologian James Martineau offered what Larsen calls “one of the most astute British readings” of Strauss found in any review from the nineteenth century (*Contested Christianity* 51). Martineau’s response was published in April 1847 in the *Westminster Review*, the quarterly for which Eliot worked as assistant editor from 1851 to 1854. Martineau praised Strauss’s dismantling of “traditional notions of biblical inspiration” but critiqued his emphasis on “mythical interpretation” because he argued that Strauss’s concept of mythology did not take sufficient account of biblical texts as historical documents, as Larsen observes (*Contested* 51-52). Strauss’s terminology was, as Martineau pointed out, imprecise; however, his introductory section (“Development of the Mythical Point of View in Relation to the Gospel Histories”) used this language to articulate and defend an

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<sup>130</sup> Larsen cites the response of Chartist leader Thomas Cooper, who published on Strauss in his popular radical periodical *Cooper’s Journal* in 1850, as a rare example of a reviewer who recognized that Strauss was not as adamantly opposed to Christianity as his opponents claimed (*Contested Christianity* 49).

<sup>131</sup> Larsen observes that this Unitarian and “anti-Straussian” collection presented *Das Leben Jesu* as “the most radical and effective attack on Christianity then on the market,” setting the tone for subsequent British reviews (*Contested Christianity* 44).

interpretive approach that would attend both to history and form. In *Romola*, Eliot goes further than Strauss in her efforts to integrate historical recovery and imaginative art.

For all the infelicity of *myth* as a critical term, Strauss used it to position his work as a corrective to what he regarded as misguided habits of typological and allegorical exegesis. As explained in chapter 2, Strauss drew a sharp distinction between the “allegorical view,” which “attributes the narrative to a supernatural source,” and the “mythical view,” which “ascribes it to that *natural* process by which legends are originated and developed” (65). Whereas the allegorical interpreter “may with the most unrestrained arbitrariness separate from history the thought he deems to be worthy of God,” the mythical interpreter “is controlled by regard to conformity with the spirit and modes of thought of the people of the age” (65). This particular definition of allegory does not accord with more flexible accounts of this narrative genre and interpretive mode, such as that offered in Eric Auerbach’s influential essay “Figura” (1938), but it does indicate the extent to which the higher criticism’s emphasis on historical recovery challenged accepted ideas about the figurative and symbolic significance of these texts. Eliot’s adaptation of Strauss’s insights in *Romola* echoes some of these reservations about restrictive allegorical modes, yet her critique of traditional modes of exegesis coexists with compassion for those who practice them. This combination of rigorous critique with reverent reflection appears in its most concentrated form in her portrayal of Savonarola. While Eliot interrogates Savonarola’s claim to special knowledge of a divine plan, she nevertheless affirms his commitment to charitable action. As she challenges Savonarola’s pronouncements, Eliot sets aside the prophetic voice and, by extension, revises the oracular model that many literary critics identify as typical of Victorian sage

discourse. Instead, she reframes the concept of religious revelation by recovering alternative genre of biblical wisdom literature, the form of the parable in particular.

### **Challenging Prophecy: Eliot's Reinterpretation of Savonarola**

Much as critics frequently align *Romola* with positivist philosophy, so also literary scholars frequently call attention to the function of prophecy in this novel; however, the complexities of Eliot's use of prophetic discourse warrant further examination. Bonaparte, for example, claims that "Eliot meant *Romola* to be a prophetic book, a prospectus for the future progress of western civilization" (*The Triptych* 27). By contrast, Carol Levine draws attention to Eliot's reservations with Savonarola's prophetic vision, arguing that "the formal and ideological aims of the text come into conflict" because "narrative, like the prophets it spurns, *already knows the future in the present*" ("The Prophetic Fallacy" 153, 156). Levine's emphasis on prophecy's predictive function highlights the "almost invincible association between the idea of prophecy and that of an unveiling of the future" that Ricoeur identifies as characteristic of this genre in the biblical tradition ("Toward a Hermeneutic" 76). Nevertheless, this tidy association obscures prophecy's important function of recontextualizing and reassessing past, present, and future events. As Carpenter underscores in her analysis of prophetic discourse in *Romola*, "the real purpose of prophecy is to provoke interpretation of human 'history'" (68).<sup>132</sup> Carpenter situates Eliot's portrayal of the prophet Savonarola in relation to the "rekindling excitement about prophecy" resulting from the "continuous

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<sup>132</sup> Kevin Mills's discussion of Victorian adaptations of apocalyptic literature further emphasizes that prophetic discourse exceeds prediction. As he notes, apocalyptic literature usually involved some element of *vaticina ex eventu* (prophecy after the event), where writers disguise history as prophecy by adopting the persona of a well-known figure from the past (15). See also Chris Bundock's *Romantic Prophecy and the Resistance to Historicism* (2016), which similarly discusses prophecy's functions beyond prediction (7).

historical” school of biblical scholarship that she identifies as beginning with the French Revolution (*George Eliot* 29).<sup>133</sup> While this scholarship has its roots in the eighteenth century, it did not reach a wide audience in Britain until the mid-Victorian period, as explained in my introduction. These patterns of dissemination and reception indicate that Eliot’s reinterpretation of Savonarola participates in broader cultural project of recovering and repositioning prophetic discourse.

By the time that *Romola* began appearing in serial installments in July of 1862, the higher criticism had circulated in Britain not only through translations such as Eliot’s *Life of Jesus* and *The Essence of Christianity* but also through the incendiary *Essays and Reviews* (1860). Featuring work by a variety of Anglican clerics and scholars—namely, Frederick Temple, Rowland Williams, Baden Powell, Henry Bristow Wilson, Mark Pattison, Charles Wycliffe Goodwin, and Benjamin Jowett—*Essays and Reviews* brought the principles of the higher criticism to a wide British audience. The very first article in this collection, Temple’s “The Education of the Human Race,” begins by asserting and transforming the voice of the biblical prophets. As Victor Shea and William Whitla note, Temple’s opening recalls the stance exerted in Thomas Carlyle’s “Signs of the Times” (published in 1829 in the *Edinburgh Review*) (165 note 2).<sup>134</sup> For Temple, this prophetic mode becomes a platform for advancing a Eurocentric belief in progress derived from both Comtean theories of positivism and the biblical higher critic Gotthold Ephraim

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<sup>133</sup> Carpenter’s discussion of this “continuous historical” school surveys James Bicheno’s *Signs of the Times* (1774), Hennell’s *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838), John Cumming’s sermons and lectures from the 1840s, Robert William Mackay’s *The Progress of the Intellect* (1850), and F. D. Maurice’s *Lectures on the Apocalypse* (1861).

<sup>134</sup> Carlyle’s “Characteristics” adapts the posture of the biblical prophets to protest what Carlyle saw as the ills of both industrialism and utilitarianism: denouncing the “mechanical” qualities of science and economics, Carlyle calls for a return to the “dynamical” pursuits of artists and poets, pursuits that he regards as contiguous with that of priest and prophet (187-95).

Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (*The Education of the Human Race*) (1780). As M. H. Abrams explains, Lessing recasts the biblical narrative of the fall and redemption as *universalgeschichte*—that is, an account of humankind's development towards perfection, not tied to any particular faith (202-3). This fall-and-redemption narrative reflects what Ricoeur identifies as a central element of biblical prophecy: its positioning of “the content of revelation” in connection to “a design in the sense of a plan that would give a goal to the unfolding of history” (“Towards a Hermeneutic” 76). Whether parsed in positivistic or biblical terms, then, prophecy assigns meaning to events by relating them to an overarching divine design.

Eliot's *Romola*, however, stands at some remove from such certain teleology: instead, her narrative suggests that, if design is present, it remains ineffable, elusive, and multiple. In keeping with Friedrich Schleiermacher's understanding of hermeneutics as an endless task that rests “on the fact of the non-understanding of discourse” (*Hermeneutics and Criticism* 227), Eliot foregrounds the frustration of interpretive efforts. She thus reaches beyond her nineteenth-century contemporaries and anticipates something that more closely resembles the “conflict of interpretations” that Ricoeur regards as defining the field of hermeneutics in the post-Marxist, post-Nietzschean, and post-Freudian era: as Ricoeur puts it, these theoretical developments emphasize that there is “no universal canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation” (*Freud and Philosophy* 27). As Ricoeur explains, these opposed theories alternatively figure hermeneutics as *kerygma* (“the manifestation of a message”) or as demystification (“the reduction of illusion”), thus giving rise to the “double motivation of willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of

obedience” (*Freud and Philosophy* 27). In similar terms, Eliot describes Romola’s inner dilemmas regarding Savonarola as a matter of discerning “where the sacredness of obedience ended, and where the sacredness of rebellion began” (468). Like Ricoeur, Eliot upholds elements of a hermeneutics of suspicion or resistance, yet without discarding the possibility of a revelatory *kerygma*. It is not through heeding a prophetic dream vision or an oracular pronouncement that Romola achieves insight. Rather, insight emerges through the twofold process of challenging the absolute authority that dreamers and visionaries purport, all the while upholding an openness to and reverence for mystery.

This dialectic process reaches its height through Romola’s encounters with Savonarola, encounters that display Eliot’s re-evaluation of a celebrated yet controversial Christian figure. Drawn in the early 1860s, Eliot’s portrait of Savonarola appeared against the backdrop of the Italian *Risorgimento*, the movement for national and cultural unification that culminated with the crowning of King Victor Emmanuel II in 1861. The political events leading to the unification of Italy sparked renewed interest in what Andrew Thompson calls “a *Risorgimento* mythology,” which reconsidered historical individuals such as Savonarola and alternatively revered or critiqued him (7). Such mythologizing informs the enthusiastic picture of Savonarola offered by Pasquale Villari’s *La Storia di Girolamo Savonarola* (1859-60), which Carroll identifies as one of the main sources that Eliot used for *Romola* (“George Eliot” 107). At the same time, other writers advanced more skeptical views, such as those reflected in Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), which, as Carroll notes,

presented Savonarola as unable to come to terms with modernity (“George Eliot” 107).<sup>135</sup> Although Eliot’s representation of Savonarola includes a vivid and critical account of the “Burning of Vanities,” through which he destroyed “handsome copies of Ovid, Boccaccio, Petrarca, Pulci, and other books” in an attempt to purge Florence of these classical influences (418-19), she tempers criticism with compassion. Her commentary on Savonarola’s Advent sermon of 17 November 1494, in which he addressed the Florentines in the style of the biblical prophets, exemplifies this blend. The narrator questions his “need of personal predominance, his labyrinthine allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures, his enigmatic visions, and his false certitude about divine intentions”; nevertheless, she affirms his “fervid pity,” “passionate sense of the infinite,” and “active sympathy” (234). The narrator acknowledges that these qualities were apparent to Savonarola’s “own large soul,” but suggests that “for the mass of his audience all the pregnancy of his preaching lay in his strong assertion of supernatural claims, in his denunciatory visions, in the false certitude which once gave his sermons the interest of a political bulletin” (235). The novel portrays his charismatic energy as exemplary yet recognizes that his denunciatory stance has significant limitations.

At the close of this chapter, the narrator underscores these limitations, all the while finding something redemptive in Savonarola’s very imperfections:

It was the fashion of old, when an ox was led out for sacrifice to Jupiter, to chalk the dark spots, and give the offering a false show of unblemished whiteness. Let us fling away the chalk, and boldly say, — the victim is

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<sup>135</sup> As Avrom Fleishman highlights, Eliot’s research for *Romola* was extensive: in addition to Villari’s biography, she also read accounts of Savonarola’s life by Pacifico Burlamacchi, F. T. Perrens, and Karl Meier, as well as Savonarola’s own writings, including his sermons, dialogues, revelations, poems, and “Discourse on Government” (113). Furthermore, Eliot studied the Italian language from the 1840s onwards and travelled through Italy with Lewes in 1860, a trip that informed *Romola* (Thompson 30, 42-49).

spotted, but it is not therefore in vain that his mighty heart is laid on the altar of men's highest hopes. (235)

Whereas Savonarola rebukes the Florentines and calls them to repentance, the narrator suggests that distinctions between black and white—in effect, saved and damned—cannot be so tidily drawn. By repositioning this sacrificial metaphor, Eliot at once undermines this ritual's fascination with purity and preserves its hope for restitution. Her symbolic turn makes provocative and forceful use of religious discourse, this time in reference to the sacrificial practices of ancient Rome. In a similar manner, Eliot reframes the language of biblical texts to inaugurate an order of mercy rather than judgement. Her vision of the kingdom of God depends not on apocalyptic visions but on subtle parables.

### **Eliot and Parable: Wisdom Writing in the Age of the Higher Criticism**

Eliot's use of parable as both a narrative form and a mode of moral teaching reflects her sensitivity to the symbolic features of religious texts and her conviction that "aesthetic teaching" should not devolve into reductive schemas, as discussed previously (*GEL* 4: 300). Since the nineteenth century, Eliot has been regarded among the wisdom writers of the Victorian era: tributes such as Alexander Main's aphoristic collection, *The Wise and Witty Sayings of George Eliot* (1874), indicated the recognition she received from her contemporaries, and John Holloway's pioneering *The Victorian Sage* (1953) included a chapter on Eliot, the only female writer featured in his study.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, the extent to which Eliot's novels belong in this category of Victorian sage writing has been subject to some debate. In his response to Holloway's initial study, George P.

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<sup>136</sup> Originally published by John Blackwood in 1874, Main's collection was subsequently updated to include passages from *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1878). By the turn of the twentieth century, it was in its eleventh edition. For further examples of Eliot's veneration by her contemporaries, see the letter dated 8 February 1877 to Eliot from Blackwood, who quoted a friend of his as having declared, "George Eliot's [books] I don't rank as Novels but as second Bibles" (*GEL* 6:340).

Landow omitted Eliot altogether, restricting his discussion of sage writing in *Elegant Jeremiahs* (1986) to non-fiction prose written by male authors. Aside from the obvious issues of gender and genre, Eliot's authorial voice sets her apart from the authoritarian qualities that Landow identifies as characteristic of Victorian sages such as Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin, and Mill. Like the other writers discussed in my study, Eliot adopts a rather different stance as interpretive and moral guide: instead of defending a fixed principle, her writings focus on opening avenues for pursuing wisdom.

Although Carlyle influenced Eliot in important ways, her praise for his capacities as a teacher indicates that she, like EBB and MacDonald, most admired the creative and exploratory qualities that emerge in texts such as Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, rather than the more controlled rhetoric exemplified in his other writings such as *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840).<sup>137</sup> Eliot's essay on Carlyle for the *Leader* (October 1855) claims that he demonstrates that "the most effective educator," like "the most effective writer," does not announce particular discoveries but, rather, "rouses in others the activities that must issue in discovery" (207). These terms sound remarkably like those used by Holloway in his discussion of Eliot: he describes her novels as animated by "slowly ripening, intermittent, half-unconscious things," observing that many of them are "written round a character who comes to an understanding of things" (130). It is not certainty but seeking that matters most in Eliot's wisdom writing.

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<sup>137</sup> William Baker observes that it was in large part due to Carlyle's influence that Eliot began to learn the German language in 1840 (21). Eliot herself wrote to her publisher Blackwood in 1859 that she hoped that Carlyle would read her first novel *Adam Bede* and that this novel would bring Carlyle as much enjoyment as his *Sartor Resartus* had brought her (*Letters* 3:23).

By tracing this process of seeking throughout *Romola*, I respond both to scholarship on Victorian sage writing and to feminist reassessments of Eliot's participation in this traditionally masculine category. Although second-wave feminist scholarship tended to regard Eliot as complicit in patriarchal discourse, more recent criticism foregrounds her feminist interventions.<sup>138</sup> In particular, Gail Turley Houston's *Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God* (2013) calls attention to Eliot's innovative use of "goddess imagery" to portray her title character in *Romola*. Houston argues that Eliot "merges the Virgin with the pagan Ariadne in order to imagine an ethical system complex enough to confront the trauma of modern life" (121). Furthermore, she claims that it was in *Romola* that Eliot "came to see herself as an interpretive seer of a wisdom tradition, rather than as *just* a translator of works by men" (130).<sup>139</sup> My own reading of *Romola* focuses on one particular element of this wisdom tradition, the parable, to show that Eliot uses this form to reframe religious revelation as a participatory experience. This participatory experience, in turn, involves a redefinition of what Eliot calls "God's kingdom": this expansive community depends on a radical compassion that all too often goes overlooked by feminist critics who focus on the self-actualization or self-denial of Eliot's heroines.

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<sup>138</sup> See, for example, Deirdre David's *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy* (1987), which critiques the conservatism of Eliot's novels and argues that Eliot "participates in a discourse of essentialist sexual politics" (176). Carpenter's contribution to Thais E. Morgan's collection of essays on gender and the sage, entitled "The Trouble with *Romola*," similarly claims that Eliot's heroine is ultimately silenced by this novel's patriarchal voices (116-19). More recently, Kate Flint's essay "George Eliot and Gender" in the *Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (2019) acknowledges the longstanding critical dissatisfaction with the fates of Eliot's heroines but highlights the complexities of Eliot's approach to these characters (136-154).

<sup>139</sup> In her analysis of *Romola*, Houston observes that Eliot's allusions to Marcilio Ficino's Platonism and Pico della Mirandola's heterodox theses indicate that the "wisdom traditions" informing the novel gather together "the Cabala, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Plato, and Zoraster" (129).

As a mode of moral teaching, the biblical parables emerge from a tradition of wisdom literature that is not prescriptive but invitational. The sayings and parables of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels reflect “the basic forms of the Old Testament and Jewish *mashal*,” as Rudolph Bultmann explains (81). Colón notes that *mashal*, the Hebrew word translated as *parabole* in the Septuagint, derives from the root “to be like” and signifies a range of tropes from metaphor to proverb to parable (3). This etymology underscores the conceptual and formal overlap among the parable, the proverb, and aphorism. As chapter 2 has emphasized, even though these latter forms might appear simply to transmit a conventional and inherited wisdom tradition, they were put to innovative uses by various nineteenth-century writers following William Blake. Eliot’s aphoristic narrative commentary possesses a similarly transformative quality. Even though Main’s collection of *Wise and Witty Sayings* occasionally distorts Eliot’s narrative voice and didactic mode, her most thought-provoking sayings retain their challenging force even when extracted from their original contexts.<sup>140</sup>

Tellingly, the very first excerpt in the *Romola* section reflects on the novel’s concept of the kingdom of God. This excerpt features the closing words of Chapter 67 (“Waiting by the River”), where Tito dies at the hand of Baldassare Calvo, the adoptive father whom he abandoned following his arrival in Florence. While this turn of events seems to satisfy a thirst for revenge, Eliot’s commentary calls into question such tidy notions. Drawing attention to the fallibility of human pronouncements, Eliot’s narrator

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<sup>140</sup> In her discussion of the *Wise and Witty Sayings*, Leah Price observes that, because Main does not recognize free indirect discourse, his volume sometimes misattributes to the narrator, identified as “George Eliot (*in propria persona*),” statements that Eliot actually locates in the perspective of individual characters. Even so, Price recognizes that many of Eliot’s novels lend themselves to the kind of excerpting that Main performs: her fiction is “punctuated with epigrams and self-contained digressions,” including the chapter epigraphs in *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda* (147-57).

ponders, “Who shall put his finger on the work of justice, and say, ‘It is there?’ Justice is like the Kingdom of God—it is not without us as a fact, it is within us as a great yearning” (549). Bridging the forms of aphorism and parable, these words adapt Jesus’ response to questions about this kingdom’s arrival: “the kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21). In effect, Eliot locates justice not in the dictum of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth but in an inward longing that resists tidy definitions. She thus exemplifies distinctive qualities of the *mashal*, which David Stern explains as “an allusive narrative with an unspoken message”: unlike other methods of moral teaching, *mashal* does not make its lessons explicit but “leaves them to its audience to figure them out” (*Midrash and Theory* 40, 44).<sup>141</sup> The unique qualities of the parable as both a narrative and a heuristic form receive brief yet notable attention in several of the higher critical studies that Eliot read.

Even though the higher criticism focused primarily on recovering the historical contexts of the Gospel accounts, it also drew attention to the formal features of the parables of Jesus. For example, Schleiermacher observed in his *Über die Schriften des Lukas (A Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke)* (1817; trans. 1825) that the parable is a form that “imprints itself . . . readily on the imagination and the memory” (396).

Strauss’s commentary on parables in *Das Leben Jesu* likewise combined historical and

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<sup>141</sup> Stern elsewhere cautions that the English term *parable*, derived from the Greek *parabole* (“something set aside”), does not fully convey the narrative and exegetical dimensions of the *mashal* (*Parables in Midrash* 11). He further underscores that, even though the parables of the Synoptic Gospels are recorded in Greek, they would have been spoken in Aramaic or Hebrew (*Parables in Midrash* 188). George Eliot’s knowledge of and attitude toward Jewish traditions have been the subject of much critical discussion. Some of her early correspondence displays disturbing anti-Semitism (see, for example, *GEL* 1: 246-47); however, several scholars have argued convincingly that Eliot later grew in appreciation for and sensitivity to Judaism. See William Baker (9-55); Saleel Nurbhai and K. M. Newton (25-45); and Richa Dwor (85-114).

formal elements: even as Strauss focused on how the parables would have been delivered in their original setting, he also underscored their capacity to prompt reflection. Arguing that the seven parables recounted in Matthew 13 would not have been spoken in the rapid succession in which they appear in the text, Strauss claimed that a parable “is a kind of problem to be solved by the reflection of the hearer; hence after every parable a pause is requisite, if it be the object of the teacher to convey real instruction, and not to distract by a multiplicity of ill-understood images” (345). Hennell’s *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* similarly called attention to the power of these images. In keeping with his skepticism regarding miracles and prophecies, Hennell claimed that “the advocates of [Christianity’s] divine origin, from a conviction of the sufficiency of historical evidence, are probably few in comparison with those who feel impressed with the divine authority of Jesus, by the weight, the beauty, and the apparent originality of his discourses and parables” (453).<sup>142</sup> Hennell’s larger project of interrogating the doctrine of inspiration, then, included thoughtful attention to the functions of particular literary forms found in biblical texts.

Eliot herself affirms the potency of such forms in her review of James Heywood’s edition of *Introduction to the Book of Genesis* (1855), an abridged translation of *Die Genesis, historischkritisch erläutert* (1835) by Peter Van Bohler.<sup>143</sup> Her review praises this book as both a concise introduction to new developments in biblical criticism and a thoughtful commentary on the Pentateuch. Significantly, Eliot closes not with argument

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<sup>142</sup> Subsequent biblical scholarship supports and develops Hennell’s remark about the seeming originality of the parables, concluding that, of all the material in the Gospels, the parables are the most likely to have originated with Jesus. See Charles W. Hedrick (118-19) and Ben Witherington (155).

<sup>143</sup> Originally published on 12 January 1856 in the *Leader*, this review is reprinted in Thomas Pinney’s edited collection *The Essays of George Eliot* (255-60).

but with anecdote: she quotes the scholar's account of "an admirable Hebrew myth which has arisen since the Christian era," a myth that appears rather like a parable in its brevity and its surprising turns. In this story, the patriarch Abraham offers hospitality to a strange, elderly man. When the man refuses to worship Abraham's God, Abraham becomes wrathful and drives him out into the wilderness. He is then rebuked by God, who asks him, "Have I borne with the man these hundred and ninety-eight years, and given him food and raiment although he has rebelled against me, and canst thou not bear with him for one night?" God's challenge prompts Abraham to repent, seek the old man, and treat him with kindness (259-60). This chastisement evokes the ending of the Book of Jonah, where God responds to Jonah's anger at the divine forgiveness for the repenting people of Ninevah by asking him, "should I not spare Ninevah, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand?" (Jonah 4:11). The extrabiblical account, however, intensifies this challenging rebuke because in this case there is no evidence that the elderly man repents. Like many of the Gospel parables, then, this story interrogates the concept of rewards and punishments, envisioning an alternative order of grace and tolerance.

By closing her review of Heywood with this extra-biblical parable, Eliot underscores the higher criticism's capacities to open the canon and to reconsider accepted concepts of inspiration and revelation. Against the backdrop of this criticism, parables emerge as a particularly useful literary form. Teaching by means of largely unspoken messages, they foreground the reader's own interpretive work. Eliot's narrative patterning throughout *Romola* similarly foregrounds hiddenness and obscurity: though her Renaissance Florence combines classical and Christian elements, she occasionally

leans more towards the style of Genesis than that of Homer, to evoke Auerbach's memorable distinction between these two methods of representation (*Mimesis* 11).<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, the series of dramatic encounters between Romola and the prophetic figures Dino and Savonarola aligns with the "strategic variation in the pattern of repetitions" that Robert Alter finds characteristic of biblical narratives, with their subtle manipulation of predetermined motifs (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* 97). Biblical narrative, as Alter explains, presents meaning "as a *process*, requiring continual revision . . . continual suspension of judgement, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in the information provided" (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* 12). Such, too, is the interpretive framework that Eliot evokes through Romola's repeated interpretive dilemmas. Lacking the intervention of "the seraphs of unailing wing and piercing vision," Romola grasps only the "stumbling guidance" provided by her fellow humans (324-25). This paradoxically resonant phrase highlights the incremental development of insight that characterizes Eliot's concept of forming wisdom.

### **Stumbling Guidance on the Way to the Kingdom of God**

Throughout the novel, Eliot presents readers with a series of dramatic encounters between her protagonist and a figure of religious authority—encounters that seem, at first glance, to be either a potential conversion scene or a potential moment of apostasy for Romola. Closer examination of Romola's thoughts as revealed both through the

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<sup>144</sup> According to Auerbach's analysis, the Homeric style as in the epic *Odyssey* presents readers with "externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena, in a definite time and in a definite place," with "thoughts and feeling completely expressed" (11). By contrast, the writers of Genesis emphasize "obscurity," leaving important considerations "unexpressed" and "mysterious" (12). Even though Eliot's historical realism means that much of her novel provides explicit and minute details of time and place, she develops Romola's character in the gaps between what is immediately said and what is only implied until much later in the novel.

narrator's commentary and through free indirect discourse, however, shows that her attempt to discern what is true and what is ethical cannot be reduced to any single pronouncement. In the first of her meetings with a prophetic figure, Romola travels to the convent of San Marco, the dwelling place of Savonarola's Dominican brotherhood. She goes in response to a message from her estranged brother, Dino, known to his fellow monks as Fra Luca, saying that he is ill and requesting that Romola visit him. Previously, Dino had appeared in the novel during the early chapters focalized through Tito: he first emerges as an unknown Dominican friar who brings Tito a note from his adoptive father, Baldassare, currently a captive in Corinth. Having sold the valuables that might have ransomed Baldassare, Tito disregards his adoptive father's plea for help. Accordingly, when he hears about the message that Romola, now betrothed to him, has received and discovers the monk's identity, he fears that his plans to marry Romola and to ensconce himself in Florence will be thwarted. Indeed, "Tito should have been right" in this suspicion, as Bonaparte observes, all the more so because Dino attempts to warn his sister by telling her an "entirely prophetic" dream (*The Triptych* 61). Romola, however, resists Dino's interpretation of this dream, and her experiences in the convent initiate a longstanding and thoroughgoing reconsideration of the concept of revelation.

Dino claims emphatically that his dream was divinely inspired: he announces to Romola that three times he has had "a vision concerning her" and pronounces it "a message from heaven" (153). In this dream, a priest with "the face of death" marries Romola to a man with "the face of the Great Tempter," and these nuptials mark the beginning of great tribulation. Dino predicts ominously, "thou, Romola, didst wring thy

hands and seek for water, and there was none” (157).<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, Dino calls his dream “a revelation” meant to warn Romola “against marriage as a temptation of the enemy” and to enjoin her “to renounce the vain philosophy and corrupt thoughts of the heathens” (158). Although this call to repentance sets up a potential conversion scene, Romola does not obey her brother, who dies shortly after this pronouncement. Then again, neither does she dismiss Dino’s dream as a mere “monkish vision, bread of fasting and fanatical ideas,” as Tito advises her when the pair converse afterwards (176). In defiance of Dino’s dream, Romola weds Tito; nevertheless, her brother’s words have a lingering and disquieting effect on her.

These disquieting effects suggest that Romola’s disobedience does not result in a definitive turn away from her brother’s prophetic insights. Despite thinking that “this vision was no more than a dream, fed by youthful memories and ideal convictions,” Romola feels “a strange awe” at witnessing one who has given his life to the ascetic practices of the Dominican brotherhood (158). Her intellectual reservations about his prophetic claims, then, coexist with an affective appreciation for the intensity of his religious vision. The narrator’s remark that, when Dino dies, “the revelation that might have come from the simple questions of filial and brotherly affection had been carried into irrevocable silence” raises the intriguing prospect that true insight might come not through prophetic visions but through human companionship (160). Later, Eliot returns to this motif, in the chapter entitled “A Revelation” (Chapter 32). Here, Romola discovers that her husband, Tito, has sold the library of her recently deceased father, Bardo, thus

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<sup>145</sup> Dino’s characterization of these figures sounds remarkably like the typological language used in Savonarola’s Advent sermon, which equates King Charles VIII of France with “the minister of God” and calls Florence “the chosen city in the chosen land” (228).

defying Bardo's wishes that his collection be given to the city of Florence. Devastated at this destruction of Bardo's legacy, Romola recalls her experiences in San Marco and discovers "struggling thoughts" within herself (322). As she reconsiders the dream, Romola continues to regard Dino's interpretation critically, all the while beginning to question her own questions.

Romola's musings about the "tangled web" that her mind has woven demonstrate this process of layering interrogative upon interrogative. Events appear to have turned out just as Dino had foretold, but accurate foretelling is not what Romola finds most troubling about her encounter with her brother. On the contrary, she regards his prediction as nothing more than an accident, reflecting, "What had the words of that vision to do with her real sorrows? That fitting of certain words was a mere chance; the rest was all vague" (323). Appalled at the prospect that she might become "a creature led by phantoms and disjointed whispers," Romola assures herself that she was right to have disregarded her brother's warnings (323-24). Nevertheless, she remains "conscious of something deeper than that coincidence of words," speculating that "there seemed to be something more than madness in that supreme fellowship with suffering" (324). For Romola, then, the greatest attraction of her brother's religious convictions is their capacity to invest suffering with sacred significance and thus to generate an expansive idea of human community.

Eliot's portrayal of these religious convictions becomes further complicated through the subtle contrasts that she draws between Dino and Savonarola, who attends Romola's dying brother. Dino's vision arises from what the narrator calls the "shadowy region" that lies apart from "the human sympathies which are the very life and substance

of our wisdom” (160). Savonarola, by contrast, offers a clearer and fuller manifestation of such compassionate fellowship. As my discussion over the following pages will show, Eliot’s characterization of this flawed yet compelling prophet demonstrates her ideas about the cultivation of sympathy, a crucial and enduring theme throughout both her prose and novelistic writings.<sup>146</sup> When Romola first hears Savonarola, she describes him as one who speaks with “a strong rich voice, startlingly in contrast with Fra Luca’s” (156). He enjoins Romola to kneel to receive her brother’s “heavenly message” and employs similarly authoritarian language; however, Romola reflects that his tone “was not that of imperious command, but of quiet self-possession and assurance of the right,” moving Romola with a “subtle mysterious influence” (156-57). These descriptive terms foreshadow Romola’s subsequent encounter with Savonarola in Chapter 40, aptly entitled “An Arresting Voice.”

This second encounter with Savonarola causes Romola to reverse her intended course of action, but she does not become Savonarola’s unquestioning disciple. Following her musings about Dino’s vision, Romola resolves to leave Tito and the city of Florence. Although disguised in “the grey serge dress of a sister belonging to the third order of St. Francis,” Romola plans not to take refuge in the cloister but “to go to the most learned woman in the world, Cassandra Fedele, at Venice, and ask her how an instructed woman could support herself in a lonely life there” (322). On the road, she

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<sup>146</sup> Most famously and most emphatically, Eliot’s essay “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), published in the *Westminster Review*, identifies “the extension of our sympathies” as “the greatest benefit we owe to the artist” (270). Literary criticism on this subject is extensive: as Rae Greiner observes, Eliot is the novelist “whose name most often appears in conversations about Victorian sympathy” (299). Recent studies include Greiner (29-300), Anger (*Victorian Interpretation* 95-130), Audrey Jaffe (121-57), and Rebecca N. Mitchell (49-69). My discussion focuses on the corporeal and sacramental qualities of Eliot’s concept of sympathy, qualities that distinguish her ideas from those advanced in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which both Greiner and Jaffe discuss as paradigmatic for Victorian writers.

meets Savonarola, who recognizes Romola and tells her that he has been given “a command from God” to recall her to Florence (355). Upon hearing this voice, Romola feels “shaken, as if that destiny which men thought of as a sceptered deity had come to her and grasped her with fingers of flesh” (355). The distancing effected by the “as if” phrasing of this simile underscores that Romola heeds Savonarola’s orders not because she believes in any literal “sceptered deity” but because his words resonate so strongly with her previous wonderings about sympathy among human beings.

Even as Savonarola’s commanding language and claim of divine inspiration echo Dino’s visionary pronouncement, the story indicates that it his words about human compassion that truly move Romola. Maintaining that Romola’s duty remains to her husband and to the people of Florence, Savonarola assures her, “sorrow has come to teach you a new worship,” exhorting, “if there is a cry of anguish, you, my daughter, because you know the meaning of the cry, should be there to still it” (361). Romola returns to Florence, yet to regard this episode as a pivotal conversion scene, as some critics do, is to obscure Eliot’s description of Romola as “inwardly struggling with strong forces” throughout this meeting and to elide the continuation of this struggle throughout the rest of the novel (360).<sup>147</sup> Despite the seeming submission of Romola’s falling to her knees at the end of this scene and declaring “Father, I will be guided. Teach me! I will go back” (363), free indirect discourse in subsequent chapters reveals significant tensions between speech and thought. For all that this incident evokes the biblical story of Paul on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9), Romola’s meeting with Savonarola is but one step in an

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<sup>147</sup> See, for instance, Bonaparte’s identification of this episode as “the conversion scene in which Romola begins her Christian pilgrimage” (*The Triptych* 71).

ongoing process of reorientation. Her struggling continues and even intensifies as she confronts both her frustrations with Savonarola's dogmatic pronouncements and her yearning for the sense of fellowship that his religious ideals afford.

Romola grapples with this tension in Chapter 44, "The Visible Madonna," which focuses on her newfound charitable work in Florence and represents her as the physical counterpart of "The Unseen Madonna," the Virgin Mary, hailed in the title of Chapter 43. Romola's free indirect discourse both challenges and affirms Savonarola's words on the road from Florence, as her compound and conditional syntax underscores the complexity of her inner dilemmas:

if she came away from her confessor, Fra Silvestro, or from some contact with the disciples of Savonarola amongst whom she worshipped, with a sickening sense that these people were miserably narrow, and with an almost impetuous reaction towards her old contempt for their superstition – she found herself recovering a firm footing in her works of womanly sympathy. (387-88)

Her consciousness that Savonarola's disciples are "narrow" anticipates her later declaration that God's kingdom must be "wider" than Savonarola's party (492), and her metaphor of "firm footing" develops the imagery of "the path of life" introduced previously (324). This metaphor develops the connection between sympathy and embodiment that Eliot suggested previously in the contrast between the "shadowy region" of Dino's vision and the "life and substance" of human sympathies (160). Unlike the visual model of sympathy advanced in Adam Smith's influential *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which figures sympathy as an imaginative process in which the "spectator" envisions himself in the position of the sufferer (22), Eliot figures sympathy in terms that combine seeing, hearing, touching, and walking. This language underscores

her departure from a strictly rational model of knowledge in favour of a wisdom that extends beyond argument into feeling and action.

Eliot's idea of wisdom as based in human sympathy aligns in noteworthy ways with Feuerbach's emphatic claims in *The Essence of Christianity* that "to suffer is the highest command of Christianity" and that "the essence of Christianity is the essence of human feeling" (60, 140). Rather like Eliot, Feuerbach describes charity as grounded in the physical senses: "No abstract being—no! only sensuous, living beings are merciful. Mercy is the justice of sensuous life . . . . The blood of Christ cleanses us from our sins in the eyes of God; it is only his human blood that makes God merciful" (53). Yet where Feuerbach insists that "all religions rest on abstraction," Eliot implies that Christianity might be re-imagined as a religion of concrete and corporeal sympathy. Without advancing the Christology that informs the writings of EBB and MacDonald, Eliot's novelistic portrayals of sympathy nevertheless suggest her ongoing fascination with the biblical figure of the suffering servant. Her subtle biblical rewritings, then, ought not to be reduced to the ideas advanced in the higher critical scholarship that she translated, as Hodgson argues convincingly: "the Jesus of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* is far removed from the Jesus to whom George Eliot was attracted, namely the Man of Sorrows who proclaimed the friendship of God and exemplified a life of service and self-renunciation" (7). Throughout *Romola*, Eliot shows her heroine's gradual attempts to understand and embody this ideal, as she both departs from Savonarola's teachings and revivifies Christianity's ideals in a broadened sense. As Romola comes to recognize, the "pressing problem" is not "to settle questions of controversy" but "to keep alive that flame of

unselfish emotion by which a life of sadness might still be a life of active love” (389). She thus turns away from intellectual debate and towards charitable action.

Despite the confidence conveyed by Romola’s free indirect discourse in the passage quoted above, the narrator’s comments at the close of this chapter hint that the next steps in Romola’s ethical development are not as sure as the previous metaphor of “firm footing” suggests (388). Foreshadowing the stumbling to come, the narrator likens “Romola’s trust in Savonarola” to “a rope suspended securely by her path,” speculating that “if it were suddenly removed, no firmness of the ground she trod could save her from staggering, or perhaps from falling” (389). Something like a fall occurs in Romola’s final confrontation with Savonarola, which sets up a potential reversal of their meeting on the road from Florence. In the aftermath of this confrontation, however, what Romola discards is less Savonarola’s Christianity than her own argumentative claims to certainty.

Following Savonarola’s excommunication by the pope and his falling out of favour with the Florentine people in the August of 1497, Romola returns to San Marco for a private audience with Savonarola. When she implores him to intervene on behalf of her godfather, who has been imprisoned and accused of conspiracy, he dismisses her supplications with a cold calculation: “the death of five men” is a “light matter” when “weighed against the furthering of God’s kingdom upon earth” (492). As the debate escalates, Savonarola equates this latter goal with his own aims in Florence, declaring, “the cause of my party *is* the cause of God’s kingdom” (492). Indignant, Romola responds, “God’s kingdom is something wider—else, let me stand outside it with the beings that I love” (492). Although she appears to reject both Savonarola’s politics and

the religious ideal of “God’s kingdom,” the novel complicates this seemingly stark reversal in the parabolic sequence that marks Romola’s second departure from Florence.

Eliot’s narrator draws attention to both the similarities and the differences between this turn of events and Romola’s previous attempt to leave the city: “Again she had fled from Florence, and this time no arresting voice had called her back. Again she wore the grey religious dress; and this time, in her heart-sickness, she did not care that it was a disguise” (500). Disillusioned not only with Savonarola but also with Tito, whose unfaithfulness has now been made known to her, Romola travels to “the little fishing village of Viareggio,” situated “on the brink of the Mediterranean,” and purchases a “hardly seaworthy” boat from a local fisherman (500). Unfurling and fastening the sail to catch “the light breeze,” as she learns to do from the fisherman in a brief lesson, she puts out to sea, reposes in the vessel, and wishes for death, patterning her actions after her memory of the story of Gostanza from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (502).<sup>148</sup> This episode signifies what Carroll calls “the breakdown of the attempt to create and live out a coherent world-view in Renaissance Florence” (*George Eliot* 192). Yet, as Romola discovers, this breakdown is also a breakthrough, one that results in her achieving a widened understanding of “God’s kingdom.”

### **The Wisdom of Interrogating Wisdom**

The sequence that comprises Romola’s second departure from Florence, which differs markedly in mimetic mode from Eliot’s larger narrative, consists of two chapters:

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<sup>148</sup> As Bonaparte observes, Eliot re-read Boccaccio’s *Decameron* between August and November 1862, while composing *Romola* (*The Triptych* 230). In addition to evoking Gostanza, this incident in *Romola* also recalls the watery grave of Maggie Tulliver at the end of Eliot’s earlier novel *The Mill on the Floss*.

chapter 68 (“Romola’s Waking”) and chapter 69 (“Homeward”). This episode, described by Eliot as a “symbolical” moment belonging to her “earliest vision” of this novel (*GEL* 4:104), reads like a story within a story, and the challenging questions that Romola poses to herself at the end of this sequence align with the interrogative mode of the parable. This sequence opens with a chiasmic intermingling of conscious and unconscious states, as the narrator observes, “Romola in her boat passed from dreaming into long deep sleep, and then again from deep sleep into busy dreaming” (550). Eliot’s descriptions of the surrounding scene are elemental and vague: “the speckless sapphire-blue of the Mediterranean” lies on Romola’s right, while on her left she sees that she has come to rest “on the shores of that loveliest sea” (550).<sup>149</sup> The absence of clear geographical markers from Eliot’s otherwise densely detailed novel heightens the disorienting effect of this passage. Upon disembarking, Romola moves from this idyllic scene to a nightmarish “village of unburied dead,” where she finds dead bodies bearing “the purple spots which marked the familiar pestilence,” the bubonic plague (552-53). Responding to cries of distress, she carries water to those still living and helps the surviving villagers (554).<sup>150</sup> In

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<sup>149</sup> While Eliot’s narrative offers no clear geographical markers, Haight’s discussion of Lewes’s notebooks from his trip to Italy with Eliot in the spring of 1860 offers a suggestive reading of Romola’s name that aligns it with the unnamed village she visits later in this sequence. As mentioned briefly in footnote 122, Haight traces the name *Romola* to a hamlet on a hill south-west of Florence near Certosa, observing that it appears in Lewes’ records from the trip (356).

<sup>150</sup> Romola conjectures that the villagers are “Spanish or Portuguese Jews” who were “driven away by the cruelty of superstition” (551). Commenting on the historical basis for this event, Baker suggests that Eliot read William Hickling Prescott’s account of the Jewish exodus following the Spanish inquisition in *The History of Ferdinand and Isabella*, published in 1800 (91). Baker further argues that these chapters show Eliot’s sympathy for the Jews as victims of religious persecution: the fact that Romola “comes to terms with her life” through these experiences implies that “the Victorian reader can learn from the experiences of the homeless, the maltreated, and the oppressed” (116). That said, the fact that the villagers hail Romola as the Virgin Mary imposes the Catholicism, and potentially the anti-Semitism, of fifteenth-century Florence. The longstanding association between Marian legends and anti-Jewish tales in England can be seen, for instance, in “The Prioress’s Tale” from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400). See Adrienne Williams Boyarin’s discussion of “The Prioress’s Tale” in *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (150-167).

effect, she resumes the role of “The Visible Madonna” that the narrator ascribes to her in Florence. This time, however, she achieves such recognition from the people themselves: one of the villagers promptly and directly identifies her as “the Holy Mother, come to take care of the people” (554). This turn of events prompts Romola to re-evaluate her experiences in and departure from Florence.

Even as this sequence begins with a strange crossing between waking and sleeping that resembles a dream, these chapters contrast markedly with Dino’s prophetic vision. First, Romola’s act of bearing water to the villagers suffering from the plague offers an ironic reversal of her brother’s prediction that she will seek for water where there will be none to be found. Moreover, her manner of interpreting her own experiences differs markedly from her Dino’s method of reductive allegorizing. Bonaparte claims that this sequence might be likened to “the dream of a medieval allegory,” where “real events are stripped of their complexity and ambiguity and appear truly in their most fundamental relations” (*The Triptych* 231). I suggest, however, that this sequence progresses in a different trajectory. As Romola interrogates “the justness of her own conclusions” (561), her thoughts regarding her disagreement with Savonarola and subsequent flight from Florence achieve further layers of complexity.

In a series of increasingly probing questions, Romola asks, “What if Fra Girolamo had been wrong? What if the life of Florence was a web of inconsistencies? Was she, then, something higher, that she should shake the dust from off her feet and say, ‘This world is not good enough for me?’” (562). As her self-examination intensifies, Romola proliferates interpretive possibilities: she entertains both the prospect that Savonarola has been wrong and the possibility that she herself may have been in error. In rejecting the

idea that she should “shake the dust from off her feet,” she recalls and revises the command that Jesus gives the twelve disciples to “shake off the dust of [their] feet” when they leave a house or city that does not receive them (Matthew 10:14). Romola, who returns to the city, repositions this biblical language to articulate a still more radical vision of the kingdom of God. Eliot further revises sacramental terms to describe this widened vision. The narrator characterizes this event as “like a new baptism to Romola,” and the story follows this symbolic baptism with something akin to the ritual of confirmation (560).<sup>151</sup> Rather than receive the spirit through being anointed—that is, through the laying on of others’ hands—Romola stretches out her own hands to those in need. This choice of phrasing thus underscores Romola’s newfound sense of compassion as sacred.

More than conversion or unconversion, more than education by disillusionment, Romola’s character formation consists of a series of reorientations that hold together skepticism and sympathy. These combinations cannot be easily mapped onto a narrative that posits a linear progression from doubt to faith or faith to doubt; instead, this story intertwines faith and doubt. Eliot effectively encapsulates her unique combination of skepticism and affirmation in the creed that Romola voices after her “new baptism”:

If everything else is doubtful, this suffering I can help is certain; if the glory of the cross is an illusion, the sorrow is only the truer. While the strength is in my arm, I will stretch it out to the fainting; while the light visits my eyes they shall seek the forsaken. (560)

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<sup>151</sup> Eliot’s reinterpretation of these sacraments accords with Feuerbach’s reframing of the Eucharist in the resonant closing statement of *The Essence of Christianity*: “It needs only that the ordinary course of things be interrupted in order to vindicate to common things an uncommon significance, *to life, as such, a religious import*. Therefore let bread be sacred for us, let wine be sacred, and also let water be sacred! Amen” (278). In effect, both Eliot and Feuerbach advance an understanding of radical immanence as a means of finding continuity between ordinary existence and extraordinary value.

The compound syntax of these two sentences recalls the basic structure of a parable: the conditional expressions beginning “if” juxtapose two statements, and the statements beginning “while” foreground the work of application. In her resolve to reach the fainting and the forsaken while her arm has strength and her eyes have light, Eliot recasts the injunction of Qohelet in Ecclesiastes 9:10, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might, for *there is* no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, wither thou goest.” Both Eliot and Qohelet champion action, figured corporeally in the hand, as a productive response to an inescapable mortality. While Qohelet casts the broad net of “Whatsoever,” Eliot grounds this imperative in the context of compassion, suggesting that charity might flourish through the acceptance of limitation.

Importantly, the challenging questions that Romola asks of herself do not eventuate in paralysis or indecision; instead, they underscore her commitment to action rather than to intellectual debate. She reflects that while helping the villagers “she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to share the life around her, to answer the call of need, and to do the work which cried aloud to be done, that the reasons for living, enduring, laboring, never took the form of argument” (560). In this way, Romola’s musings on her experiences echo the conviction that Eliot herself expressed in an 1859 letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, stating that she no longer had “any antagonism towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves” and instead felt “a sympathy with [such faith] that predominates over all argumentative tendencies” (*GEL* 5: 31). The openness to a religion of transfigured suffering that Eliot expressed in this letter anticipates the new kind of creed articulated by

Romola. Furthermore, her emphasis on active sympathy aligns with the distinctive qualities of parable as both a literary form and a didactic strategy.

In much the same way that that the Gospel parables demand “the embodied response of the reader,” as Colón puts it (16), so also Eliot emphasizes Romola’s attempt to translate insight into practice. Application thus becomes the *sine qua non* of interpretation for Eliot, much as it is for MacDonald in *Phantastes*. Both of these Victorian writers recover concepts that Hans-Georg Gadamer identifies as largely missing from the work of nineteenth-century hermeneutic thinkers like Schleiermacher. Gadamer explains that, as the higher criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries focused on recovering historical contexts of biblical texts, it departed from older exegetical models that sought to apply scripture to the present day (*Truth and Method* 309). Eliot’s creative responses to the higher criticism uphold this criticism’s historically rigorous approach yet also recover application as an interpretive principle, much as Gadamer himself does in *Truth and Method*. Gadamer insists that interpreters must regard “not only understanding and interpretation but also application as comprising one unified process” (307). He explains this priority of application in relation to older models of legal and theological hermeneutics, as well as to Aristotelian ethics, all of which base moral knowledge not on theoretical or objective knowledge but on practice—on “applying something universal to a particular situation” (310).<sup>152</sup> Eliot, too, emphasizes that application requires particular situations. This emphasis becomes clear in her final

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<sup>152</sup> Gadamer’s recourse to Aristotelian ethics indicates further points of continuity between his hermeneutic framework and Eliot’s emphasis on sympathy. Arguing for the relevance of Aristotelian concepts of moral knowledge to hermeneutics, Gadamer foregrounds Aristotle’s pairing of *phronesis* (“thoughtful reflection”) with *sunesis* (“sympathetic understanding”) (*Truth and Method* 319).

chapters, which turn from the elemental sparseness of chapters 68 and 69 to the detailed historical realism that characterizes the larger novel.

### **The Extraordinary Turn to the Ordinary**

Ultimately, the character Romola leaves the unnamed village to go back into the city of Florence, just as the novel *Romola* discards the “romantic and symbolical” (*GEL* 4: 104) qualities of this interlude and resumes its overarching mimetic mode. These returns show Eliot’s adaptation and intensification of the parable’s basic narrative strategy. Parables, as Colón explains, juxtapose “an ordinary situation” with “an extraordinary turn of action”: this juxtaposition enables an “extravagant reversal,” whereby the story redefines reality (13). In Eliot’s novel, Romola’s decision to go home constitutes such an extravagant reversal: she relinquishes her role as the “Blessed Lady”—the role that the previous portrayal of Romola as “The Visible Madonna” seems to have foreshadowed—and places herself, more humbly, “within the walls of Florence” (564). This turn away from grandeur reflects the esteem for ordinary things that characterizes Eliot’s novels. The memorable closing sentences of *Middlemarch*, for instance, underscore that a new St. Teresa or a new Antigone would be impossible in the present age and instead locate the “growing good” of the world in “unhistoric acts” (515). Even though the title character of *Romola* is repeatedly hailed as the “Madonna Antigone,” this novel similarly ends with an acceptance and reframing of limitation. Romola discovers that “God’s kingdom” is not abstracted and idealized but, as Hodgson puts it, “a matter of bringing the utopian into the real, of realizing the wider kingdom under specific, always difficult circumstances” (92). Such readiness to confront difficult

circumstances emerges in practical ways through Romola's responses to the now-dead Tito's infidelity.

Following her return to Florence, the widowed Romola welcomes into her household Tessa—the peasant maid whom Tito had deceived into thinking that a carnival ruse meant that they were legally married—and her two illegitimate children, along with Romola's widowed cousin, Monna Brigida.<sup>153</sup> This extravagant hospitality recalls the counter-intuitive order of the Gospel parables, from the welcoming of the wayward young man in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) to the inversion of the social order in the parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1-14). These parables depend on what Robert Funk calls a “central irony,” one that “contravenes the traditional way of representing God as a royal monarch” (18). Instead, the parables advance what Funk calls “the unkingdom of the unGod,” where “outsiders become insiders and insiders are left out” (135). The ending of *Romola* reflects a similarly surprising turn. Intensifying Romola's earlier assertion that, if Savonarola's view is correct, she will “stand outside” God's kingdom, the novel's closing pages suggest, in a more expansively compassionate gesture, that there is no “outside” God's kingdom (492).

The final scene, which moves forward in time to the year 1509 and depicts Romola as caregiver and teacher to Tessa's growing children, underscores the expansion of Romola's ideas. Critics have long expressed dissatisfaction with Romola's return to

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<sup>153</sup> The unconventional domestic scene at the end of *Romola* is all the more remarkable given Eliot's own home life and her relationship with Lewes. Eliot met Lewes through their mutual friend Herbert Spencer in 1852: from 1854 onwards, she lived with him and spoke of him as her husband. However, Lewes remained legally married to Agnes Jervis, despite her longstanding affair with Thornton Hunt. Haight's biography cites Lewes's registration of Edmund Alfred (Hunt's son) as his own son on the boy's birth certificate as an act that officially condoned Agnes's adultery and thus effectively forfeited grounds for divorce (129-33).

the domestic sphere, but feminist readings based on self-actualization have had little to say about the radical reframing of religious and social community that underpins this newly imagined kingdom of God.<sup>154</sup> Moreover, Romola's role as storyteller demonstrates the breadth of her compassionate understanding, at the same time that it serves as an analogue to Eliot's own novelistic method. These qualities become evident in a conversation about ambition and happiness that takes place between Romola and Tessa's son Lillo, who has become a "handsome lad" of fourteen (581). Emphasizing the importance of "having wide thoughts," Romola identifies her father as an example of "the greatness that belongs to integrity" and Savonarola as a model of "the greatness that belongs to a life spent in struggling against powerful wrong" (582). She thus affirms elements of both Bardo's classical scholarship and Savonarola's Catholicism, though without becoming a disciple of either man. She closes this discussion with something akin to a parable, telling Lillo a short narrative that begins, "There was a man to whom I was very near" (563). Although the story that follows this cloaked reference to Tito bears elements of a cautionary tale, it avoids narrowly moralistic discourse. Romola credits Tito's beauty, cleverness, and manners, suggesting that at the time that she met him "he never thought of doing anything cruel or base" (563). Rather than end with a pithy moral statement, Romola leaves Lillo "looking up at her with awed wonder" and assures him

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<sup>154</sup> For examples of feminist criticism that takes issue with Romola's position at the novel's end, see Deirdre David (195) and Kelly E. Battles (233). Other critics have drawn attention to the unconventional qualities of Romola's household scene, though without evoking the concepts of parables and the kingdom of God. Levine and Turner emphasize that the joint household of Romola and Tessa departs from the "happily married couple" of the typical Victorian novel and upsets the traditional figures of "the angel in the house" and "the fallen woman" (1). Alison Booth compares Romola's situation with that of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Florence Nightingale (112).

that she will tell him more “another time” (563). Without explicitly stating her meaning, Romola provides him with time and latitude to interpret the story for himself.

As Eliot’s uses of the parable demonstrate, her historical novel aims not only to recover but also to transform. Her statement that she wrote *Romola* with “the most ardent care for veracity of which [her] nature [was] capable” (*GEL* 6: 336) aligns with what Schleiermacher characterized as the “insistence on historical interpretation” that typifies the higher criticism’s approach to biblical texts (*Hermeneutics and Criticism* 15). Even so, Eliot’s dynamic engagement with biblical wisdom literature foregrounds and intensifies what Schleiermacher calls “the new concept-forming power of Christianity,” which extends beyond these historical qualities (*Hermeneutics and Criticism* 15). Eliot herself outlined a similar “concept-forming power” in a letter dated 30 July 1863, just before *Romola* completed its serial run. Commenting on her recent reading of Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (*Life of Jesus*), she writes, “We can never have a satisfactory basis for the history of the man Jesus, but that negation does not affect the Idea of Christ either in its historical influence or in its great symbolic meanings” (*GEL* 4: 95). As this remark underscores, Eliot’s novelistic response to the higher criticism goes beyond the work of challenging accepted interpretations of biblical texts. Rather, her stories revitalize these texts, seeking to explore their aesthetic and ethical possibilities across time and within the hearts of her readers.

In this way, her historical and creative recovery of wisdom literature aligns with what John Ruskin achieves in *The Queen of the Air* (1869). Both Ruskin and Eliot write against the backdrop of the higher criticism, but Ruskin goes further than Eliot in his challenge to historical and scientific methods. Ruskin re-imagines ancient texts in a

deliberate effort to teach readers how to better inhabit the present. Broadly speaking, *The Queen of the Air* participates in the nineteenth-century cultural formation that Eliot's *Middlemarch* represented as "the Key to all Mythologies" (54): even though Ruskin ostensibly focuses on Greek stories in this text, he works across a variety of mythic frameworks. His examination of Athena makes direct references to biblical texts in ways that reflect the issues raised by higher criticism, including the emergence of comparative religious study. Much as Eliot's *Romola* invites an interpretive approach that is based not on deciphering a code but on proliferating questions, so also *The Queen of the Air* participates in the quest for "the Key to all Mythologies" by changing the terms of the search. Ruskin approaches the lore surrounding Athena in an imaginative, rather than intellectual, mode: not as problems to be solved but as riddles to be pondered.

## Chapter 4: Wisdom's Reach: Recovering Personification in John Ruskin's *The Queen of the Air*

Although John Ruskin presents *The Queen of the Air* (1869) as a collection of lectures on the Greek goddess Athena, his discussion of Athena's wisdom ranges well beyond this specific topic and stretches this scholarly form to its limits. Subtitled "A Study of the Greek Myths of Cloud and Storm" and based on a series of talks that Ruskin delivered at University College London, this volume opens with a preface recommending its contents to "persons who are beginning to take an interest in the aspects of mythology, which only recent investigation has moved from the realm of conjecture to the realm of rational inquiry" (*Works* XIX: 292).<sup>155</sup> "Recent investigation" signals the non-doctrinal and textually rigorous approach to comparative mythology championed by the philologist Friedrich Max Müller, the leading proponent of what became known as "the science of religion." This approach focused on the historical basis of religious ideas, aiming to study the sacred texts of various religions on an objective basis—that is, without theological motivation.<sup>156</sup> The biblical higher criticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries participated in this turn to "the science of religion," as I have explained in my introduction. Despite his gesture to this "realm of rational inquiry," Ruskin departs from the academic methods advanced by Müller and his contemporaries. Far from presenting objective historical analysis, *The Queen of the Air* advances an impassioned

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<sup>155</sup> The volume form of *The Queen of the Air* was published in May of 1869 by Smith, Elder, and Company. Ruskin's lectures were originally delivered in March of that same year. All references to works published by Ruskin are to the following edition (abbreviated and cited parenthetically as *Works*): *The Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12).

<sup>156</sup> Müller, a German scholar, moved to England in 1846 and worked at Oxford, publishing his seminal essays in the 1850s. See J. Jeffrey Franklin's discussion of the context in which Müller's "science of religion" rose to prominence in the mid to late nineteenth-century ("The Influences" 814-15).

reinterpretation of Greek mythology and presents Athena as the embodiment of Ruskin's own aesthetic, ethical, and social vision. In effect, Ruskin makes Athena into what Dinah Birch aptly calls "a living image of wisdom and moral regeneration," one that demonstrates the range of his readings on mythology and takes substantial artistic license with his historical subjects (*Ruskin's Myths* 103).<sup>157</sup>

As a result of this imaginative approach, *The Queen of the Air* offers at once an exposition of Greek mythology and an innovative act of myth-making that brings together classical and biblical wisdom traditions. Calling attention to this creative combination, Paul L. Sawyer observes that Ruskin's Athena blends "certain Greek myths" with "the Old Testament figure of Wisdom, said to be God's helpmate at the Creation" ("Ruskin and the Matriarchal Logos" 139). More specifically, Ruskin's portrait of this Greek goddess draws on a variety of hymns about personified Wisdom in both biblical and apocryphal texts. His description of Athena as a "forming power" that has "by all nations" been "understood as a creative wisdom, proceeding from the Supreme Deity; but entering into and inspiring all intelligences that work in harmony with Him" recalls Proverbs 8, which describes Wisdom as present in the moment of creation and exhorting all people to "hearken" to her call (*Works* XIX: 378; cf. Proverbs 8:23-32). Throughout *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin augments this imagery by drawing from the apocryphal books of Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon, particularly in his emphasis on Athena's dwelling among the clouds and her presence as a divine breath (cf.

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<sup>157</sup> In addition to Müller, Ruskin's readings included Edward Burnett Tylor's *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (1865), as well as older scholarship such as Carl Otfried Müller's *History and Antiquities of the Doric Race* (1830) and Richard Payne Knight's *An Inquiry into the Symbolical Languages of Ancient Art and Mythology* (1818) (see Birch *Ruskin's Myths* 116-21).

Ecclesiasticus 24:3-4; Wisdom 7:25). These texts reflect Jewish writers' efforts to harmonize and amplify their own religious traditions within a Hellenistic context; Ruskin, in turn, appropriates this wisdom writing in an attempt to combine Jewish, Greek, and Christian traditions. Thickening his allusions by making recourse to a variety of New Testament texts, Ruskin draws from descriptions applied in his source texts to Wisdom, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.<sup>158</sup>

The basic structure of *The Queen of the Air* highlights the scope and ambition of Ruskin's myth-making: its three lectures outline Athena's activity in ever-expanding terms. By titling his lectures in transliterated Greek and providing both a literal English translation and a supplementary gloss, Ruskin signals this dynamic range. His first lecture is entitled "Athena Chalinitis," which he initially translates as "Athena the Restrainer" (a reference to stories about her bridling of Pegasus) and then parses as "Athena in the Heavens." This lecture's topics are as sprawling as its expansive frame suggests: Ruskin draws extravagant connections between stories about Athena's presence in the atmosphere and human efforts to discern cosmological order. His second lecture, "Athena Keramitis" (which Ruskin renders as both "Athena, fit for being made into pottery" and "Athena in the Earth"), supplements this account by tracing Athena's presence in plant and animal life, as well as identifying her as a force that inspires creative activity among humankind. Ruskin foregrounds Athena's role in shaping human art throughout his final lecture, "Athena Ergane" (translated as "Athena the Worker" and "Athena in the Heart"),

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<sup>158</sup> See Leo G. Perdue's discussion of the historical context informing Ecclesiasticus (also called Sirach or Ben Sira), composed in the second century BCE, and the Wisdom of Solomon, written in Greek in the first century BCE (*The Wisdom of Creation* 243-46, 291-94). Ruskin's allusions to New Testament texts range from the Gospel of Matthew to the Book of Acts to the Epistle to the Colossians.

which forges explicit connections to Ruskin's earlier writings. At the time of composing these lectures, Ruskin hoped that *The Queen of the Air* would become the first installment of a revised and corrected series of his writings: "a kind of 'prequel' to *Modern Painters*, *The Stones of Venice* and the other early works," as John Batchelor puts it (219). As this range suggests, *The Queen of the Air* provides an unruly, self-reflexive meditation on Ruskin's output as Victorian polymath.

Although this revised and corrected series was not published as Ruskin intended, these plans indicate that *The Queen of the Air* merits attention in relation to a broader contextual framework than critics tend to pursue. Most studies of this text, including those by Birch and Sawyer cited previously, position it against the backdrop of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century approaches to Greek mythology, highlighting both points of continuity and points of departure from these precedents.<sup>159</sup> To further illuminate Ruskin's approach to Athena as Wisdom, my analysis situates *The Queen of the Air* within a wider context: Ruskin's reading of biblical higher criticism and the interpretive and aesthetic ideas that he developed in response to that criticism.

Ruskin himself provides warrant for this twofold approach in the opening paragraph of his first lecture, where he alludes to issues raised by the higher criticism and indicates that these issues condition his approach to his subject. Beginning with an appeal to the reader for permission to consider Greek mythology "in a temper differing from that in which it is frequently treated," he maintains, "we cannot justly interpret the religion of any people, unless we are prepared to admit that we ourselves, as well as they, are liable

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<sup>159</sup> Other criticism that foregrounds this context includes Kevin A. Morrison's "Myth, Remembrance, and Modernity," Sharon Aronofsky Weltman's "Mythic Language and Gender Subversion," Brian Gregory's "Sexual Serpents," and John Hayman's "Ruskin's *The Queen of the Air* and the Appeal of Mythology."

to error in matters of faith” (*Works* XIX: 295). His emphasis on this shared propensity to error is in keeping with the discoveries of the increasing number of British biblical scholars who, by the 1860s, were not only translating and reviewing the German higher critics but also publishing their own scholarship—especially the collectively authored *Essays and Reviews* (1860) and J. W. Colenso’s *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (hereafter, *The Pentateuch*, 1862). These studies generated controversy by applying the same methods to the Bible as to other historical documents, questioning miraculous events, and highlighting the chronological inaccuracies of biblical texts. Both Ruskin’s direct statements about this scholarship in his correspondence and his indirect responses to it in *The Queen of the Air* reveal that he shared with these critics an interest in challenging literalist exegesis and recontextualizing biblical texts. At the same time, his approach to wisdom literature counters some of the higher criticism’s methodological impulses: his imaginative revivification of Athena underscores that narrowly historical models are restrictive paradigms through which to approach the sacred writings of any people. In an age of increasing emphasis on scientific knowledge, Ruskin reasserts the value of mystery and metaphor.

This esteem for mystery and metaphor, in turn, invites a reassessment of Ruskin’s authorial voice, particularly as it has been understood in relation to the critical category of the Victorian sage. While Ruskin does not appear in John Holloway’s *The Victorian Sage* (1953), he figures heavily in George P. Landow’s *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (1986), which redefined sage writing by focusing exclusively on non-fiction prose by male authors. Landow positions Ruskin’s work within the tradition of typological exegesis and focuses on his use of prophetic discourse (27-28), but I argue

that *The Queen of the Air* ventures beyond both this exegetical model and this discursive framework. Understood in relation to higher critical interpretive debates, Ruskin's adaptation of a variety of wisdom literatures calls into question the certainty that has by many critics been regarded as characteristic of the sage's rhetorical stance. Landow emphasizes that Ruskin, as a paradigmatic Victorian sage, fashions himself as a "master of experience" whose perceptive faculties surpass those of his audience (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 132); likewise, Birch identifies "an assumption of secure authority" as a characteristic feature of Ruskin's "public voice" ("Lecturing" 203). While Ruskin undeniably adopts an authoritarian and patronizing tone throughout many of his works, *The Queen of the Air* evinces a vocal range that invites further study.<sup>160</sup> In this text at the very least, Ruskin speaks as a sage in dialogue—with himself, as well as with his audience or readers—and thus displays an openness not to be found in Landow's paradigm of the Victorian sage. Even as Ruskin criticizes both the "masters of history" and the "masters of modern science," he frequently recognizes his own authorial limits (*Works* XIX: 299, 294). *The Queen of the Air* presents these limits both explicitly, through Ruskin's repeated admissions of error, and implicitly, through its textual discontinuities. These discontinuities become heightened through a distinctive tension between form and content: to discuss a creative, experiential wisdom in a lecture is necessarily to put medium and message at odds. Nevertheless, the process by which

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<sup>160</sup> Examples of Ruskin's works that evince a more consistently authoritarian tone include the four essays that comprise *Unto this Last* (1862). While an analysis of Ruskin's extensive oeuvre exceeds the present study, further inquiry might evaluate the extent to which the contradictions evident in *The Queen of the Air* appear in Ruskin's other writings as well.

Ruskin attempts to negotiate this tension suggests that writing about wisdom in forms that do not easily accommodate the subject may be as productive as it is challenging.

In the analysis that follows, I consider Ruskin's personification of Wisdom in relation to the controversies raised by *Essays and Reviews* and *The Pentateuch*. While Ruskin's comparative study of classical and biblical wisdom literature affirms some of the basic premises of this scholarship, his poetic approach in *The Queen of the Air* demonstrates substantial reservations with the higher criticism's historical methods. His inventive recovery of metaphor offers an occasion to reassess his participation in several Victorian discourses. *The Queen of the Air* reflects the Eurocentric biases that informed nineteenth-century studies of comparative religion; at the same time, however, Ruskin's lectures challenge scholarly claims to certain knowledge in ways that call into question such hierarchical assumptions. Similarly, even though his personification of Wisdom as a female goddess displays some of the patriarchal assumptions of Victorian Britain, his dynamic representation of Athena troubles dichotomous concepts of gender, regardless of Ruskin's own views on the subject.<sup>161</sup> Ruskin's mythopoesis, then, is subject to cultural and gendered biases but nonetheless invites a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the very terms by which knowledge, religion, and authority are constructed.

Taken together, Ruskin's ambitious discussion of Wisdom throughout this lecture series attempts to bring together a Christology that responds to the pressures exerted by the higher criticism, an ecology that departs from Darwinian science, and a philology that

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<sup>161</sup> The topic of Ruskin and women has been the subject of much critical debate, as discussed later in this chapter. These debates concern both Ruskin's published works and his personal experiences, including his relationships with Effie Gray and Rose La Touche. For a useful overview, see Sharon Weltman's entry on "Sexuality and Gender" in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin* (157-69).

differs from Müller's work on comparative myth. This ambition has complex ramifications for Ruskin's stance as moral guide. From time to time, his erudition underscores the authoritarian ethos that Landow finds characteristic of Ruskin and of the Victorian sage as prophet more generally (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 154-56, 164-65). For the most part, however, Ruskin tempers his didactic imperatives in ways that align with the alternative genealogy of the Victorian sage as wisdom writer that I have traced through Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George MacDonald, and George Eliot. As Ruskin reaches beyond what he can grasp, he presents the pursuit of wisdom as an endless search, the object of which becomes known through the very process of seeking.

### **Storms of Controversy: Ruskin and the Higher Critical Debates of the 1860s**

While Ruskin's interpretation of the stories of ancient Greece appears to be the most immediate context for *The Queen of the Air*, closer examination shows that this interpretation evolved in conjunction with his reading of biblical higher criticism. In effect, his study of the "Greek Myths of Cloud and Storm" responds to quite another variety of "storm": the interpretive controversies surrounding *Essays and Reviews* and *The Pentateuch*. These publications generated debates that lasted throughout the 1860s: they galvanized and split public opinion, reaching a wide readership due to responses in the British periodical press.<sup>162</sup> *Essays and Reviews*, which featured contributions from seven British scholars (Frederick Temple, Rowland Williams, Baden Powell, Henry

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<sup>162</sup> Two of the contributors to *Essays and Reviews* (Henry Bristow Wilson and Rowland Williams) were tried for heresy in the Court of Arches but acquitted on appeal. Colenso, Bishop of Natal, was found guilty of heresy by the episcopal court at Cape Town (see Lentin 98-100). Theologically conservative responses to *Essays and Reviews* included the reactionary volumes *Replies to Essays and Reviews*, edited by Samuel Wilberforce, and *Aids to Faith*, edited by William Thomson, Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol. See Shea and Whitla's discussion of the reception of *Essays and Reviews* in Britain (28-54).

Bristow Wilson, Mark Pattison, Charles Wycliffe Goodwin, and Benjamin Jowett), went into its thirteenth edition in 1869, by which time it had sold 24, 250 copies (Nixon 52). Issued in October 1862, Colenso's *The Pentateuch*, which offered a mathematical critique of the figures and genealogies given in the biblical accounts, sold 8,000 copies in three weeks and went into four editions (Shea and Whitla 848). The debates surrounding these studies underscore that both the findings and the methods of the higher criticism generated controversy: the authors were denounced not only because they disputed doctrines concerning miracles and eternal punishment but also because their approaches to biblical texts challenged what Jude V. Nixon calls "the interpretive hegemony of literalism" (55). While Ruskin's writings indicate his agreement with the higher criticism's findings as well as with aspects of its methods, *The Queen of the Air* indicates his resistance to historical methods that disregard the subtleties of symbolic forms.

By presenting Athena as equivalent to "the Neith of the Egyptians" as well as to Wisdom as personified in biblical and apocryphal literature (*Works* XIX: 305), Ruskin echoes one of the basic claims advanced in *Essays and Reviews*: that biblical texts should be seen as equivalent to the religious writings of other cultures and, indeed, that they emerged in dialogue with other cultural traditions. Rowland Williams's review of the biblical scholarship of Christian Karl Josias von Bunsen ("Bunsen's Bible Researches"), in particular, emphasized these points: it affirmed Bunsen's "examination of the Bible from non-Hebraic sources," as well as his argument that "not only was there a bible antedating the Judeo-Christian canon, but that the Jewish religion is neither the only sacred one nor the only one in which divine providence has acted," as Nixon puts it (58). More explicitly, Ruskin calls attention to the shockwaves generated by *Essays and*

*Reviews* when he observes that “this literal belief [in Athena] was, in the mind of the general people, as deeply rooted as ours in the legends of our own sacred book; and that a basis of unmiraculous event was as little suspected . . . by them, as by us” (*Works* XIX: 298). Ruskin’s use of the first-person plural pronoun establishes a connection with his audience and highlights the enduring legacy of his own Evangelical heritage, suggesting that his quest for Wisdom was a deeply personal one.

Even though Ruskin claims in his autobiography, *Praeterita* (1885), to have experienced a “final apostacy” in 1858, his subtle rewritings of biblical texts underscore the critical need to understand his responses to Christianity in nuanced terms (*Works* XXXV: 492). His turn to the mythology of Egypt and Greece throughout the 1860s reflected his growing conviction that no single religious tradition had a monopoly on truth, yet this turn coexisted with a thoroughgoing return to biblical texts—not only as a means of wielding authority when addressing a predominantly Christian audience but also as sources of creativity and insight. Ruskin’s biblical rewritings thus align with Eliot’s expansive reformulation of “the kingdom of God” in *Romola*, as discussed in chapter 3: both Ruskin and Eliot write less to repudiate biblical texts than to add to them. Consequently, their literary output has more in common with works by George MacDonald and Elizabeth Barrett Browning than the critical habit of classifying the former writers as “apostates” and the latter as “Christian” would suggest. In an 1864 letter to his friend MacDonald, Ruskin playfully identified himself as one who had become “a pagan” (*The Winnington Letters* 486). Nonetheless, if by “pagan” Ruskin meant one who draws eclectically from a variety of religious and literary traditions, then MacDonald might not have been so far from paganism himself, as discussed in chapter 2.

Rather than categorize these writers based on their membership in or departure from particular church communities, my analysis focuses on the reading practices that inform their engagement with biblical texts as literature. In Ruskin's case, the limits of established taxonomies become apparent both before and after his alleged turn away from religion. As Birch emphasizes, Ruskin's early years were more influenced by Scotch dissent than by the Church of England to which his family belonged ("Who Wants Authority?" 68). Francis O'Gorman draws attention to further layers of complexity when he remarks that "Ruskin, the Evangelical Protestant, celebrated the Pre-Reformation Catholic architecture of Gothic Venice" throughout his writings of the 1850s ("Religion" 146). A more useful lens through which to consider Ruskin's response to Christianity emerges in the critical method of focused Bible study that informed his Evangelical upbringing and continued to shape his work in years to come. Sara Atwood observes that "the cadence and style of his writing," as well as his "habit of biblical quotation and paraphrase," show that the Bible memorization of his early life had a lasting influence (264). Long after Ruskin discarded the doctrines of Evangelical Christianity, he sustained elements of Protestantism's approach to reading biblical texts. As rote memorization evolved into an astute attention to literary form, Ruskin developed a sensitivity to particular words as well as to their figurative qualities. Moreover, several passages throughout *The Queen of the Air* suggest that his attention to the symbolic qualities of biblical texts coexisted with reverence for these text's aesthetic and ethical possibilities.

Throughout *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin articulates and defends a method of imaginative reading that he developed in response to his readings of the higher criticism but that nonetheless differs from this criticism's key practices. By the time that Ruskin

wrote his lecture series, he had clearly expressed his agreement with the authors of *Essays and Reviews* and *The Pentateuch* in several letters to his father. What is more, he had entered into the social circles of some of these authors through his acquaintance with Margaret Alexis Bell, who was a personal friend not only of Bishop Colenso but also of several contributors to *Essays and Reviews*.<sup>163</sup> Even so, his approach to Greek mythology takes issue with what Ruskin calls “modern historical inquiry.” He argues that the stories of Athena possess “a veracity of vision” that “no merely historical investigator can understand” and “can only be interpreted by those . . . who themselves in some measure also see visions and dream dreams” (*Works* XIX: 309). Through his emphasis on presentism, Ruskin argues that narrowly historical approaches are limited in their capacity to understand symbolic texts. This position is not as different as it might first appear from that advanced in Benjamin Jowett’s “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” the closing article in *Essays and Reviews*. Even though Jowett repeatedly insists that right interpretation requires recovering a biblical passage’s historical meaning, he further affirms that “many parts of scripture”—including Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Gospel parables—evinced a “depth and inwardness” that require “a measure of the same qualities in the interpreter himself” (503). As Jowett’s essay indicates, the higher criticism’s turn to history developed in conjunction with renewed attention to the literary form of biblical texts, from the studies of biblical parallelism by Robert Lowth and Johann Gottfried Herder (as discussed in chapter 1) to the brief yet telling remarks about the Gospel

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<sup>163</sup> Bell founded Winnington Hall, an innovative school for girls at which Ruskin lectured throughout the 1860s (see Batchelor 199-201). On Bell’s connections to biblical scholars including Colenso and the contributors to *Essays and Reviews*, see Van Akin Burd (73-74). For relevant correspondence between Ruskin and his father, see *The Winnington Letters* (457).

parables by critics from Friedrich Schleiermacher to David Friedrich Strauss (as discussed in chapter 3).

Concerns about the limitations of approaching biblical texts through a rigidly historical lens became uppermost in the debates surrounding Colenso's *The Pentateuch*, the publication of which coincided with the fourth edition of *Essays and Reviews*. Colenso's questioning of Mosaic authorship was in itself controversial, but the uproar over his work focused primarily on his precise mathematical critique of the dates, dimensions, and demographics of the opening books of the Bible. Not long before the publication of *The Pentateuch*, Ruskin predicted in a letter to Bell that this book would generate "a splendid crash" and that even *Essays and Reviews* would seem to be "nothing to it"—both of which predictions proved accurate (*The Winnington Letters* 376, 379). Where *Essays and Reviews* polarized public opinion, with conservative thinkers condemning it and more liberal thinkers praising it, *The Pentateuch* found few defenders. As Timothy Larsen explains in his study of Colenso's reception, even "the religiously liberal or secular press" hesitated to praise *The Pentateuch* because its mathematical critique relied on what was regarded as an excessively literal reading of the Bible (*Contested Christianity* 72-75). Even though Colenso aimed not to reject biblical authority altogether but to reform church dogmas that were based on a commitment to scripture's exact words, this message was, for the most part, lost on his readers because of his method.

Given Ruskin's reservations with "merely historical" inquiry, his support of *The Pentateuch* appears surprising; however, his affirmation of Colenso indicates that he understood this scholarship as using an extreme form of literalism to demonstrate the

limits of literalism itself. Writing to Bell, who provided refuge to Colenso in the aftermath of *The Pentateuch*'s publication, Ruskin declared, "Well, *I* will stand by your Bishop . . . . I'll stand by him to *any* extent: you may tell him so: I'll say anything that I can—anywhere—to anybody—publicly—in print—in private—as he chooses"; moreover, he told his father that he himself had years ago ventured "far beyond the point at which [Colenso] is standing now" (*The Winnington Letters* 384, 457). In effect, Ruskin and Colenso employed different scholarly methods to arrive at similar conclusions. Colenso's mathematical critique not only drew attention to the historical inaccuracies of biblical accounts but also showed that to approach these texts as precise historical records is to distort them. For his part, Ruskin goes one step further, formulating an alternative interpretive framework to counter what he regarded as wrongheaded tendencies in both historical and scientific inquiry. In *The Queen of the Air*, he advances an approach to reading ancient texts that focuses on their symbolic polysemy.

### **Perceiving Darkly: Mythopoesis and Ruskin's Resistance to "Modern Science"**

Rather than uncover the historical factors that produced the myths of Athena, *The Queen of the Air* expounds on and valorizes the creative act of myth-making itself. Calling attention to this text's imaginative qualities, John Hayman remarks that Ruskin writes not simply as "a commentator on" but as "a creator of myth" (111); Sawyer adds another layer of complexity to this assessment by calling Ruskin's work "both an original act of myth-making and a myth *about* myth-making" (*Ruskin's Poetic Argument* 253). In other words, *The Queen of the Air* offers a metacommentary on the limits and possibilities of mythic expression—a mythopoesis. As Ruskin defines it, a myth is simply "a story with a meaning attached to it, other than it seems to have at first" (*Works* XIX:

296). By defining *myth* in terms of what is “other,” Ruskin highlights its allegorical qualities, though he goes on to add that these multiple layers of meaning cannot be easily determined, continue to develop over time, and signify across cultural traditions. For Ruskin, then, this “other” layer of meaning is endlessly and productively plural.

While Landow emphasizes the typological basis of these creative and interpretive methods, I propose that his description of Ruskin’s idea of myth as a “polysemous allegory” can be usefully expanded to conceptualize Ruskin’s subtle repositioning of typological exegesis in response to the higher criticism (*The Aesthetic* 407). As Landow explains elsewhere, typological exegesis presupposes “the non-canonical belief that God had dictated every word of the Bible” (*Victorian Types* 55); moreover, exegetical handbooks such as Thomas Hartwell Horne’s influential *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (1825) distinguish a *type* from a *parable* on the basis that the former is “grounded in fact, not in a fictitious narrative” (qtd. in *Victorian Types* 51). In rejecting verbal inspiration and integrating biblical and classical texts, Ruskin undoes this distinction. Moreover, he reclaims “fictitious narrative” rather than “fact” as the grounds for an alternative understanding of storytelling’s truth.

Outlining his parameters for “the right reading of myths,” Ruskin claims that mythology requires a participatory method of interpretation: the right reader of myth is necessarily also a co-creator. Ruskin advances this method based on four principles about mythology’s “true vision”: first, that it is “founded on constant laws common to all human nature”; second, “that it perceives, however darkly, things which are for all ages true”; third, “that we can only understand it so far as we have some perception of the same truth”; and fourth, “that its fulness is developed and manifested more and more by

the reverberation of it from minds of the same mirror-temper, in succeeding ages” (*Works* XIX: 310). As Ruskin theorizes it, mythology is legible only to receptive individuals who, in the act of interpreting these primal stories, amplify them. He thus attempts to reconcile a timeless concept of “things which are for all ages true” with a model of progressive revelation, one in which the interpreter always “perceives . . . darkly.”

While Ruskin articulates this elusive model in the immediate context of his critique of what he calls “historical analysis,” which he spurns for its “clumsy and vapid veracity of externals,” he later uses this model to further his arguments against “modern science” (*Works* XIX: 310, 294). The spread of higher biblical scholarship coincided and intersected with the development of evolutionary theory, as highlighted in *Essays and Reviews*: several contributors directly reference Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859).<sup>164</sup> At the same time that *Essays and Reviews* contested accepted ideas about biblical inspiration, then, it also called into question the natural theology articulated by thinkers such as William Paley earlier in the nineteenth century, as Robert Hewison explains (38).<sup>165</sup> *The Queen of the Air* responds to these dual pressures both by repositioning classical and biblical wisdom texts and by revitalizing what Ruskin calls “myths relating to natural phenomena” (*Works* XIX: 291). He accomplishes this, in part, by responding to Darwin.

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<sup>164</sup> Both Baden Powell and Jowett make explicit references to Darwin in their essays, as Nixon notes (52). Temple’s discussion of humankind’s progress in his opening essay, “The Education of the World,” discussed briefly in my third chapter, assumes a broadly evolutionary perspective.

<sup>165</sup> For discussions of Ruskin within the context of natural theology, see Hewison (34-40), O’Gorman (“‘Influence’ in the Contemporary Study of the Humanities” 14-18), and George Levine (233). Other studies that consider Ruskin’s recourse to imaginative myth as a means of countering the increasing prestige of science in the nineteenth century include Michael Spinkler’s “Ruskin on the Imagination” (115-139) and Birch’s “Ruskin, Myth, and Modernism” (32-47).

Ruskin's resistance to Darwinian theories becomes evident in his second lecture when he discusses Athena's presence in plant and animal life. Following a brief reference to "the distinctions of species," Ruskin appends a footnote explicitly stating that his ideas "are in nowise antagonistic to the theories which Mr. Darwin's unwearied and unerring investigations are every day rendering more probable." His objections to Darwin, however, become clear when he goes on to remark, "it has always seemed to me, in what little work I have done upon organic forms, as if the species mocked us by their deliberate imitation of each other when they met: yet did not pass into one another" (*Works* XIX: 358). Analyzing the frequent and disparaging references to Darwin that occur throughout Ruskin's writings, George Levine argues that these two thinkers "practiced two conflicting kinds of science" that, in turn, reflect conflicting uses of language (224). Levine explains that while "Darwin's thought" reflects "the impulse to substantiate metaphor and particularly to find a real place in the material order for older mythological expression," Ruskin progresses in the opposite direction: "to transform the material into metaphor" (245). Ruskin's fundamental disagreement with Darwin, then, issues from his commitment to metaphor—to a dynamic mode of perceiving darkly.

This contrast between the metaphorical language of myth-making and the empirical language of science can be brought into sharper relief by turning to Paul Ricoeur's category of *poetics*. As explained in my previous chapters, Ricoeur's category signifies not a particular kind of writing but a particular use of writing, one that exercises "a referential function that differs from the descriptive referential function of ordinary language and above all of scientific discourse" ("Toward a Hermeneutic" 100). While science constructs truth according to "the criteria of verification or falsification," the

“poetic function,” according to Ricoeur, presents truth as a revelatory “manifestation” that cannot be empirically verified (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 102). Ruskin valorizes such a “poetic function” when he insists that “the Myth of Athena as a Formative and Decisive Power” continues to signify even “after science has done its worst” (*Works* XIX: 354). He further affirms the power of metaphoric expressions by claiming that the poetry of John Keats and William Morris offers “a more truthful idea of the nature of Greek religion and legend” than does “frigid scholarship” (*Works* XIX: 309).

In opposing the poetic and scientific functions of language and aligning religious discourse with the former, Ruskin anticipates some of Matthew Arnold’s arguments in *Literature and Dogma*, a series of essays on biblical interpretation published serially in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1871. Challenging those who purport to prove or disprove doctrinal statements on the basis of scripture’s exact words, Arnold emphasizes that these interpreters fail to grasp that biblical language is “language *thrown out* at an object of consciousness not fully grasped” (36).<sup>166</sup> As Arnold puts it, “terms, in short, which with St. Paul are *literary* terms, theologians have employed as if they were *scientific* terms” (21). While Ruskin and Arnold make similar claims about religious language’s metaphorical qualities, *The Queen of the Air* is unique in its use of metaphorical language to articulate this point. In effect, these texts exemplify the Ricoeurian distinction between rhetoric and poetics that I have applied throughout my reassessment of Victorian sage writing: whereas *Literature and Dogma* relies on persuasive rhetorical tactics, *The Queen*

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<sup>166</sup> Arnold’s injunction to read the Bible as poetry aimed to correct both conservative theologians who held to the literal inspiration of scripture and opponents of Christianity who claimed that biblical texts had been discredited by science (see Franklin *Spirit Matters*, 218-19). In his 1863 essay “The Bishop and the Philosopher,” Arnold criticized both *Essays and Reviews* and *The Pentateuch* for employing what he saw as insufficient critical methods (see Nixon 73-74; see also Larsen, *Contested Christianity* 74-75).

*of the Air* invites readers to pursue “the twisting pathway of heuristic fiction” that Ricoeur aligns with poetics (“Biblical Hermeneutics” 89).

Adopting the poetic language of mythmaking, Ruskin closes the preface to his lecture series by hailing the personified Athena:

Ah, masters of modern science, give me back my Athena out of your vials. You have divided the elements, and united them; enslaved them upon the earth, and discerned them in the stars. Teach us, now, but this of them, which is all that man need know,—that the Air is given to him for his life; and the Rain to his thirst, and for his baptism; and the Fire for warmth; and the Sun for sight; and the Earth for his meat—and Rest. (*Works* XIX: 294)

Insisting that the project of analyzing and classifying nature has not enriched human understanding in a meaningful way, Ruskin urges his readers to focus not on the increase of knowledge but on the ethics of knowledge. For all the anthropocentrism implied by his possessive pronouns, his elemental, even sacramental, language initiates a primal reorientation to both word and world. His impassioned appeal discards the scientist’s methods and instruments; indeed, his reference to the “enslaved” elements criticizes science and technology for their abuse of the earth, a recurrent theme throughout Ruskin’s writings.<sup>167</sup>

Ruskin’s praise for mythology as a mode that “perceives, however darkly, things which are for all ages true” provides nuance to the metaphors of visual acuity that emerge throughout his published works, as well as his concomitant emphasis on knowledge gained through the careful study of nature. From *The Elements of Drawing* (1857) to the five-volume *Modern Painters* (1843–1860), much of Ruskin’s art criticism focuses on the

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<sup>167</sup> Ruskin has emerged as a prominent figure in recent ecocritical studies of Victorian literature, including Allen MacDuffie’s *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (Cambridge UP, 2014), Vicky Albritton and Frederick Albritton Jonsson’s *Green Victorians* (U of Chicago P, 2016), and Heidi Scott’s *Chaos and Cosmos* (Penn State UP, 2014).

capacities of the visual imagination—so much so that Landow identifies Ruskin’s “word-painting,” or “visually oriented prose,” as exemplifying one of the chief means by which Victorian sages portray themselves as “the masters and true possessors of language” (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 132, 134). Landow claims, then, that Ruskin employs the trope of keen sight to underscore his credibility as a sage whose perceptual faculties surpass those of his audience. Throughout *The Queen of the Air*, however, Ruskin adopts a different metaphorical register and, in turn, a different intellectual stance. Much as EBB’s *A Drama of Exile* uses the trope of hearkening to question the idea that wisdom consists in superior sight, as chapter 1 has shown, so Ruskin calls attention to the limits of all knowledge. His imprecise, poetic expressions complicate the assertions of certainty that appear elsewhere in *The Queen of the Air*. Specifically, his recovery of personification challenges the Eurocentric ideas of progress and superiority that otherwise inform Ruskin’s approach to comparative religion.

### **Comparative Religion and Ruskin’s Poetics: Fine Grotesques and Pathetic Fallacies**

Even though Ruskin’s praise for the stories of Athena over and against modern science sets him apart from many of his contemporaries, his approach to comparative mythology reflects the cultural biases of his time. Published the same year as Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), *The Queen of the Air* emerged against the backdrop of Victorian constructions of “Hellenism” and “Hebraism,” as well as the distinctly hierarchical framework of nineteenth-century comparative religious study. As Terence Thomas notes, this century’s turn to the “high” religions of Hinduism and Buddhism as objects of “intellectual and exotic interest” reflected Orientalist assumptions; the beliefs of “primitive” societies such as “the tribal religions of Africa and the Caribbean,”

meanwhile, were not regarded as worthy of serious study (283).<sup>168</sup> Similar hierarchies are evident in *The Queen of the Air*. Positioning himself as a redactor who has curated the more palatable aspects of his subject and discarded others, Ruskin tells the audience of his second lecture that he has assembled “only instances of what is beautiful in Greek religion,” warning that “even in its best time” this religion contained “deep corruptions” and “degraded forms” (*Works* XIX: 365). While these reservations distinguish Ruskin’s view of Greek culture from the “sweetness and light” that characterize Arnold’s reductive and biased version of Hellenism, he nevertheless advances his own hierarchical categories that reflect his society’s assumptions.<sup>169</sup> Speaking in the dominant discourse of his time, Ruskin follows his remarks about the “degraded forms” of Greek religion by claiming that “in the religions of lower races, little else than these corrupted forms of devotion can be found” (*Works* XIX: 365). He calls Athena as “the Desire of all nations,” but he clearly regards some nations as more discerning than others (*Works* XIX: 387).

The contradictions that emerge throughout *The Queen of the Air* usefully illuminate some of the tensions within nineteenth-century concepts of universalism. As Sebastian Lecourt explains, the work of nineteenth-century anthropologists and scholars of comparative religion indicates that “there are at least two different roads to universalism that intersect in frequently vexing ways”: on the one hand, there is “a universalism that attempts to impose a single set of values on the entire world,” and, on the other, “a universalism that would try to sum up a world of contending values” (71).

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<sup>168</sup> See also Franklin’s work on the rise of British interest in Buddhism from the 1840s onwards, including this religion’s influence on Arnold’s thought (“The Influences of Buddhism” 817-21).

<sup>169</sup> Birch’s analysis of *The Queen of the Air* discusses in greater detail the extent to which Ruskin’s emphasis on “the sterner elements of Greek religion” departed from “the widely-held view of the Greeks as a light-hearted and beauty-loving people,” a view more in keeping with Arnold’s ideas (*Ruskin’s Myths* 94-96).

Aspects of the latter, more promising mode of universalism are evident in Colenso's biblical scholarship, which emerged within the context of his missionary activity in South Africa. As the preface to the first volume of *The Pentateuch* explains, Colenso's inquiry into the historical accuracy of these texts was prompted by a conversation he had with the Indigenous man who was helping him to translate the Bible into Zulu. In response to the helper's question "is all this true?" Colenso reflects, "My heart answered, in the words of the Prophet, 'Shall a man speak lies in the name of the Lord?' Zech. xiii. iii. I dared not do so" (vii). This anecdote underscores that Colenso's re-evaluation of the Bible was prompted by his interactions with what Ruskin calls "the lower races" (*Works* XIX: 365), and thus this incident challenges the hierarchical assumptions dominant in the nineteenth-century discourse of comparative religion. The case of *The Queen of the Air* is similarly complex. This text clearly participates in what Lecourt identifies as "a universalism that attempts to impose a single set of values on the entire world" (71); however, it also approaches a more hospitable universalism that opens toward plurality. Ruskin ultimately uses the myths of Athena to question any single religious authority, his own included.

Tellingly, Ruskin moves between these two varieties of universalism when his second lecture draws on the biblical account of Paul's missionary activity at the Athenian Areopagus. Recalling the scene and speech of Acts 17:16-34, Ruskin states that "opposite to the temple of this Spirit of the breath"—that is, to Athena—stood "an altar to a God unknown;—proclaimed at last to them, as one who, indeed, gave all men life, and breath, and all things" (*Works* XIX: 386). In the sermon to which Ruskin alludes, Paul dismisses Greek rituals and issues a clear call to repentance and conversion; however, he does so by appealing to the Greek writers Epimenides and Aratus: "for in him we live, and move,

and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (17:28). While this quotation is arguably an act of appropriation that makes the Greek poets serve the Christian God, it nevertheless implies that these poets have something valuable to contribute to theology. Moreover, even though Paul’s sermon emphasizes his proclamation of the hitherto “unknown” God, Ruskin’s remarks following his allusion to Acts 17 express far less confidence in such revelatory power.

Ruskin supplements his allusion to Paul’s speech in the Areopagus with a cautionary note: “we ourselves, fretted here in our narrow days, know less, perhaps, in very deed, than they, what manner of spirit we are of, or what manner of spirit we ignorantly worship” (*Works* XIX: 387). His suggestion that religious mysteries remain unknown develops the sense of epistemic limitation that Ruskin expresses at the beginning of his first lecture, when he recalls and revises Psalm 14:1 (“the fool hath said in his heart, *There is no God*”). Warning readers against dismissing the myths of Athena as “superficial” and mistaken, Ruskin implores, “remember that, whatever charge of folly may justly attach to the saying, ‘There is no God,’ the folly is prouder, deeper, and less pardonable, in saying, ‘There is no God but for me’” (*Works* XIX: 296). His addition “but for me” cautions against definitive proclamations, whether those of an individual claiming to *be* God or an individual claiming to *speak for* God.

This emphasis on epistemic limitation informs Ruskin’s use of language throughout *The Queen of the Air*. Taking issue with the reductive terminology whereby “superstition” denotes “the creeds of the past” and “religion” signifies “the creeds of the present day,” he emphasizes that both understandings are incomplete (*Works* XIX: 295). His seemingly dismissive statement that the Greek storyteller may be “a reserved

philosopher, who is veiling a theory of the universe under the grotesque of the fairy tale” (*Works* XIX: 297), should be understood in light of Ruskin’s theory of the grotesque, an aesthetic category that he celebrates. As indicated by his discussion of grotesque symbolism in the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856), his use of the term is far from pejorative: indeed, he praises “the noble nature and power of grotesque conception.” In particular, Ruskin valorizes the “fine grotesque,” a form that he explains as “a series of symbols thrown together in a bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself” (*Works* V:132).<sup>170</sup> For Ruskin, the “fine grotesque” requires the imagination of the beholder or reader to supplement that which exceeds the artist or author’s capacity to render in visual or verbal form.

Ruskin’s explanation of the “fine grotesque” as issuing from “bold and fearless” perception assigns to this symbolism an important dispositional quality. This emphasis on emotion, in turn, underscores the complexity of Ruskin’s concept of the “pathetic fallacy,” as he defines it in the same volume of *Modern Painters* and as he employs it in *The Queen of the Air*. He explains this concept in broad terms, as “a fallacy caused by an excited state of the feelings, making us, for the time, more or less irrational,” yet he discusses it more specifically in relation to personifications of nature (*Works* V:210). Even though Ruskin claims that the best poets avoid this tendency, the contrast he draws between its use by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Alexander Pope indicates that the pathetic fallacy may be moving and pleasurable, provided that it reflects genuine emotion

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<sup>170</sup> As an example of the fine grotesque, Ruskin cites Edmund Spenser’s presentation of “malicious Envy” in the first book of *The Faerie Queene* (1590) (*Works* V: 133).

rather than artifice. While Ruskin's position tends to be misremembered as wholly condemning, this concept serves as part of a subtle commentary on the relationship between art and feeling. Deanna Kreisel effectively highlights this nuance when she observes that Ruskin's objection is not to the pathetic fallacy but to "what we might call the 'projective fallacy' that lacks true pathos or emotion" (1250). Ruskin's use of the pathetic fallacy in *The Queen of the Air* is all the more fitting given that his vision of Athena embodies a wisdom that is not "intellectual" but "of the heart" (*Works* XIX: 305).

In his discussion of Athena in the natural world, Ruskin dismisses detached observations and reasoned conclusions, reclaiming the pathos of the pathetic fallacy:

If you ask an ordinary botanist the reason of the form of a leaf, he will tell you it is a 'developed tubercle,' and that its ultimate form 'is owing to the directions of its vascular threads.' But what directs its vascular threads? 'They are seeking for something they want,' he will probably answer. What made them want that? What made them seek for it thus? Seek for it, in five fibres or in three? Seek for it, in serration, or in sweeping curves? Seek for it, in servile tendrils, or impetuous spray? Seek for it, in woollen wrinkles rough with stings, or in glossy surfaces, green with pure strength, and winterless delight?

There is no answer. But . . . over the entire surface of the earth and its waters . . . there is engraved a series of myths, or words of the forming power, which, according to the true passion and energy of the human race, they have been enabled to read into religion. (*Works* XIX: 378)

According to Ruskin, the act of personifying this "forming power" manifests "true passion and energy." He himself incorporates this energy into the cadences of his own prose. Layering interrogative upon interrogative, Ruskin's anaphoric patterns underscore that nature's design or purpose remains indiscernible, even as he uses these patterns to add imagery that suggests careful and detailed study. In its implicit universalism, this passage brings together unity and plurality: he speaks of a single "human race" at the same time that he recognizes a multiplicity of attempts ("a series of myths") to articulate

this “forming power.” This variety ultimately complicates the patriarchal ideology that informs his personification of Wisdom as a female goddess.

### **Shapeshifting Goddess and Dynamic Logos: Ruskin’s Expansive Wisdom**

As a long history of feminist criticism has emphasized, Ruskin’s representation of women is a highly vexed issue. From Kate Millett’s landmark critique (1970) of Ruskin’s efforts “to ennoble a system of subordination through hopeful rhetoric” (72) to Sharon Aronofsky Weltman’s reassessment of this rhetoric for its subversive possibilities (1998), much critical commentary has concentrated on the separate spheres for men and women delineated in Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens” (1865).<sup>171</sup> The titular echo of this piece in *The Queen of the Air* suggests the uneasy connections between these two texts.

Remarking on the limiting ideal imagined for women in “Of Queen’s Gardens,” Sawyer claims that Ruskin’s Athena “reflects in reverse the power relationships maintained by the sexes in the actual social world in order to perpetuate them” yet concludes that she has a “bivalent” function: “confirming patriarchal hegemony but also making new roles for women thinkable” (“Ruskin and the Matriarchal Logos” 140, 141). Indeed, the many Victorian women writers who constructed powerful feminist platforms by recovering

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<sup>171</sup> Millett’s influential article contrasts Ruskin with John Stuart Mill, claiming that between Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens” and Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869), one can find “nearly the whole range and possibility of Victorian thought” on the subject of “sexual politics” (63). Weltman’s reassessment of this interpretation can be found in *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen: Gender Subversion in Victorian Culture* (17-25). In her recent contribution to the 2015 *Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, Weltman draws attention to Ruskin’s practical efforts to reform women’s education, noting that his vision for their education was wider than those of many of his contemporaries, including Coventry Patmore and Charles Dickens (“Gender and Sexuality” 167-68). Other feminist interventions in the debate about Ruskin and gender include Jennifer M. Lloyd’s “Raising Lilies: Ruskin and Women” (*Journal of British Studies* 34 no. 3 [1995], pp. 325-50) and Amelia Yeates’s “Ruskin, Women’s Reading, and Commodity Culture” (*Nineteenth-Century Prose* vol. 35 no. 1 [2008], pp. 135-56). See also the collection of essays entitled *Ruskin and Gender*, edited by Dinah Birch and Francis O’Gorman (Palgrave, 2002).

pagan goddesses lend credence to this more hopeful possibility.<sup>172</sup> As my analysis will show, *The Queen of the Air* possesses a latent feminist potentiality, regardless of Ruskin's own attitudes toward women. At a textual level, then, the difference between Ruskin's personified Wisdom and the female wisdom figures that MacDonald presents, discussed in chapter 2, is more one of degree than of kind. Bringing together a range of masculine and feminine attributes, Ruskin's wisdom embodies a dynamism that is not only gendered but also theological and cosmological in its implications.

While previous studies have highlighted the blend of male and female imagery that emerges in Ruskin's discussion of Athena as serpent and bird, this composite morphology is but one manifestation of her resistance to fixed categories.<sup>173</sup> I suggest that the expansive energy of Ruskin's Athena further shows the theological work of *The Queen of the Air*, as well as the plurality that underlies Ruskin's recovery of figural modes in response to the higher criticism. My aim is to develop Sawyer's assessment of Ruskin's Athena as a "Matriarchal Logos" that "freely revises the deity of the Judeo-Christian tradition" and Weltman's observation that Ruskin's presentation of Athena as a "Formative and Decisive Power" departs from the Greek tradition wherein "formative power is inherently, specifically masculine" ("Mythic Language" 358; "Ruskin and the Matriarchal Logos" 140). In my view, the cumulative effect of these combinations is not simply to feminize Christ or to masculinize Athena but to display the irreducibility of

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<sup>172</sup> Gail Turley Houston's *Victorian Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God* (Ohio State UP, 2013) explores the intersection between Christian and pagan symbolism of female divinity in the works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Brontë, Florence Nightingale, Anna Jameson, and George Eliot. Her recent article on the use of Isis by the feminist Owenite socialist Eliza Sharples continues this line of inquiry ("What Would the Goddess Do? Isis, Radical Grandmothers, and Eliza Sharples 'All Reform Will Be Found to Be Inefficient that Does Not Embrace the Rights of Women,'" *Religions* vol. 9 [2018], pp. 1-15).

<sup>173</sup> See especially Brian Gregory's "Sexual Serpents" (75-82) and Weltman's "Mythic Language" (359-69).

Ruskin's personified Wisdom to a single type. Much as Eliot underscores her reservations with reductive forms of allegory in *Romola* through figuring her title character as an inextricable fusion of classical mythology's Ariadne and Christianity's Virgin Mary, so also Ruskin's shapeshifting goddess signals his poetic and interpretive strategy. He retains typology's basic commitment to partial revelation but resituates this dynamism within a composite framework, one that is neither unitary nor linear. Ruskin's play with typology thus recovers the dynamism that Eric Auerbach identifies in the etymology of *typos* and *figura*, as discussed in chapter 2 ("Figura" 11).

By drawing eclectically from a range of wisdom traditions, Ruskin calls attention to points of intersection among these traditions. He thereby extends and develops the critique of institutionalized Christianity effected by studies of myth from the late eighteenth century onwards: as Birch explains, early nineteenth-century scholars including Richard Payne Knight proposed that all mythic narratives shared a common basis in fertility worship and thus concluded "that the beliefs of Christianity might not be wholly separate from those of primitive pagan mythologies" ("Ruskin, Myth, and Modernism" 34). While Birch argues elsewhere that Ruskin "had only limited sympathy with Knight's belief in a universal worship of a generative principle," *The Queen of the Air* nevertheless emphasizes the underlying point of Knight's scholarship: that the stories of Christianity are intertwined with the mythologies of other cultures (*Ruskin's Myths* 121). Ruskin explicitly places these wisdom traditions in dialogue with each other when he identifies "the nymph Taygeta" from Greek mythology as "one of those Pleiades of whom is the question to Job, – Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?" (*Works* XIX: 321).

Ruskin's intertwining of religious traditions becomes most clearly evident in the connections he draws between Athena and the Holy Spirit. He suggests that the Greek image of Athena as an "unconsuming fire" influenced "the symbol of direct inspiration, in the rushing wind and divided flames of Pentecost" (*Works* XIX: 341). He later ventures this comparison in more daring terms: "You would, perhaps, hardly bear with me if I endeavoured farther to show you . . . the analogy between the spiritual power of Athena in her gentle ministry, yet irresistible anger, with the ministry of another Spirit whom we also . . . are forbidden, at our worst peril, to quench or grieve" (*Works* XIX: 346).<sup>174</sup> As his tentative phrasing underscores, the force of this comparison is not to suggest that all wisdom finds its fulfillment in the Christian tradition but, more radically, to highlight the various sources of Christian symbols and ideas.

Through his emphasis on the non-Christian precedents for Christian symbolism, Ruskin reverses and fractures typology's progressive and unifying force. From the early church fathers onward, many Christian exegetes have used typology to obscure "Jewish history and national character" and thus transform the Old Testament "from a book of laws and a history of the people of Israel into a series of figures of Christ and the Redemption, as Auerbach observes ("Figura" 30). Rather than progress from the "old covenant" to the "new covenant," Ruskin departs from this order and exceeds canonical boundaries. His recourse to apocryphal wisdom traditions further calls attention to the vexed issue of canon formation, which received renewed attention in light of the higher

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<sup>174</sup> Ruskin's statement alludes to Jesus' statement in the Gospel of Matthew that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (12:31-32).

criticism.<sup>175</sup> While his discussion of Athena's place among the clouds makes explicit references to Greek and Egyptian mythology (*Works* XIX: 319-23), this discussion also recalls Ecclesiasticus 24:3-6, which portrays wisdom as dwelling among the clouds and reigning over all nations and peoples. Furthermore, the title for Ruskin's third lecture, "Athena Ergane," (translated as "Athena the Worker"), echoes the Wisdom of Solomon, which describes Wisdom as "the worker of all things" (7:22).<sup>176</sup> These subtle allusions form part of a larger pattern of evoking apocryphal wisdom literature that is evident throughout Ruskin's oeuvre. For instance, he tentatively entitled a projected chapter of his unfinished autobiography *Praeterita* "The Laws of the Son of Sirach" (Burd 19-20); likewise, his *Mornings in Florence* (1877) quotes Wisdom of Solomon 7:7, "I prayed, and the Spirit of Wisdom came upon me" (*Works* XXIII: 383). Ruskin's recourse to apocryphal wisdom literature underscores the extent to which his engagement with biblical texts resists classification along fixed ecclesiastical lines.<sup>177</sup>

Ruskin's modulation of typology further reflects the nuanced Christology that he articulated in response to the higher criticism. Although *The Queen of the Air* does not directly discuss the many "lives of Jesus" that circulated in Victorian Britain following Eliot's 1846 translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835), Ruskin's discussion of

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<sup>175</sup> See Galia Ofek's discussion of the debates about canonicity that arose in conjunction with the spread of higher critical biblical scholarship in nineteenth-century Britain (165-67). Apocryphal wisdom literature itself reflects efforts at a kind of theological integration akin to what we see in Ruskin. See Leo G. Perdue's discussion of Ecclesiasticus as "the forging of a somewhat uneasy synthesis between older Israelite and Jewish wisdom and Hellenistic paideia" and Wisdom of Solomon as "Jewish faith" in "Hellenistic guise" (*The Wisdom of Creation* 291-92).

<sup>176</sup> The first title of this third lecture ("Athena Ergane") might also allude to *liturgy*, from the Greek *λειτουργία* (public worship and public service), ultimately a derivative of *λαῶς* (*people*) and *εργος* (one that works) (See "Liturgy, n." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*).

<sup>177</sup> While most Protestant Christians do not consider the apocryphal books as part of the Old Testament, Roman Catholics regard them as deuterocanonical (see Richard Hess 6-8).

Wisdom reflects in subtle ways his response to the renewed interest in the historical person of Jesus. In *St. Mark's Rest* (1877), Ruskin briefly references “various ‘lives of Christ,’” which he classifies as ranging from the “critical” to the “sentimental,” only to conclude, “there is only one light by which you can read the life of Christ—the light of the life you now lead in the flesh” (*Works* XXIV:304).<sup>178</sup> Setting aside both “historical” and “sentimental” approaches, Ruskin swerves from textual study to embodied practice. Rather than simply replace the letter with the spirit, his emphasis on “the life of the flesh” reclaims material, corporeal existence. A similar emphasis on corporeality informs his portrayal of Wisdom throughout *The Queen of the Air*. Taken together, Ruskin’s three glosses on his lecture titles (“Athena in the Heavens,” “Athena in the Earth,” and “Athena in the Heart”) show a trajectory of descent and internalization that underscores his characterization of Wisdom as an immanent divine presence. This trajectory recalls the kenotic Christology of EBB’s *A Drama of Exile*, discussed in chapter 1. Furthermore, this focus on immanence accords with MacDonald’s emphasis on the Word made flesh—and, still more radically, with Eliot’s portrayal of the biblical figure of the suffering servant as a model for human compassion.

In much the same way that EBB challenges the anthropocentrism of the opening chapters of Genesis by evoking the Book of Job’s alternative cosmology, so also Ruskin effects a reorientation toward all life, not just human life. The activities of Ruskin’s

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<sup>178</sup> The publication and translation of Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* and Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (1863) prompted a variety of subsequent studies in Victorian Britain. John Seeley’s *Ecce Homo* (1865) navigated a nuanced middle path between historical and devotional study; F. W. Farrar’s *The Life of Christ* (1874) adopted a primarily devotional perspective but made some concessions to the higher criticism. Farrar prompted and influenced a range of other devotional studies in the years afterwards, including Henry James Coleridge’s *The Public Life of Our Lord* (1874), G. S. Drew’s *The Son of Man* (1875), and John Cunningham Geikie’s *The Life and Words of Christ* (1877). See Daniel L. Pals’s *The Victorian ‘Lives’ of Jesus* (80-94).

personified Wisdom militate against the very concept of separate spheres, whether for men and women or for vegetable, animal, and human beings. As Ruskin portrays her, Athena possesses both a “physical power” and a “spiritual power” that intersect in important ways: she is “the Spirit of Life in material organism,” the “formative energy in the clay” (*Works* XIX: 346). His explanation of this spiritual power highlights its expansive domain: it includes “the power that catches out of chaos charcoal, water, lime, or what not,” and Ruskin insists that “we shall not diminish but strengthen our conception of this creative energy by recognizing its presence in lower states of matter than our own” (*Works* XIX: 356-57). Even as the term “lower states of matter” embeds an anthropocentric hierarchy, he assembles various forms of life by virtue of the creative energy that imbues them.

Midway through “Athena Chalinitis,” Ruskin captions the many ways in which Athena interanimates and sustains all things:

- I. She is the air giving live and health to all animals.
- II. She is the air giving vegetative power to the earth.
- III. She is the air giving motion to the sea, and rendering navigation possible.
- IV. She is the air nourishing artificial light, torch or lamplight; as opposed to that of the sun, on one hand, and of *consuming* fire, on the other.
- V. She is the air conveying vibration of sound. (*Works* XIX: 328)

This passage reflects the formal complexity of *The Queen of the Air*, which, for all its academic guise, bears a distinct resemblance to religious hymns celebrating personified Wisdom. At first glance, this catalogue provides a schematic outline for the rest of the points advanced in his lecture. On closer examination, the repetitive patterns and cosmological scope of these descriptions underscore the sense in which *The Queen of the Air* offers what Sawyer calls “a Universal Prayer to a kind of *natura naturans*” (“Ruskin

and the Matriarchal Logos” 139). More particularly, Ruskin’s portrait of Athena as the Wisdom that shapes and enlivens all things, from vegetable and animal activity to human artifice, recalls the hymn to God the Son in the opening chapter of Colossians: “by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and in him all things consist” (1:15-17). Just as EBB portrays Christ as “*gradually transfigured*” into “*humanity and suffering*” by evoking the hymn on Jesus’ humility in Philippians 2:6-8, so also Ruskin adapts the cadences of biblical texts to re-imagine Wisdom as the Word made flesh, to understand the divine *Logos* as a living and active presence.<sup>179</sup>

### **Wisdom and the Matter of Words: Philology and the Challenge of Definition**

Throughout *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin’s representation of Wisdom as a dynamic *Logos* demonstrates both his engagement with and his departure from Müller’s influential philological theories. As Birch explains, Müller posited that the “earliest forms” of mythology “had to do with the degeneration of language”; though elements of this etymological work appealed to Ruskin, he rejected Müller’s idea that mythology reflects the decay or disease of language (“Ruskin, Myth, and Modernism” 37). Instead, Ruskin valorizes the language of mythmaking for its imaginative capacities, repeatedly upholding poetry and metaphor over and against the discourses of history and science. As

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<sup>179</sup> Ruskin’s connections between the personified Wisdom of Proverbs 8 and the *Logos* of John’s Gospel accord with observations made in various works of nineteenth-century biblical scholarship, such as George R. Noyes’s *New Translation of Psalms and Proverbs* (1886) and Thomas Kelly Cheyne’s *The Wisdom Books* (1889). For twenty-first century scholarship that continues this line of inquiry, see Charles W. Hedrick’s recent (2014) discussion of “wisdom Christology” in relation to a variety of New Testament texts, including the hymns in Philippians and Colossians 1 evoked by EBB and Ruskin (48-60).

a result, his attempts to trace the etymology and meaning of particular words function not to restrict but to proliferate meanings.

At the beginning of his second lecture, Ruskin offers an extensive and thoughtful consideration of Athena as *spirit*. He thus draws attention to the vexed issue of translation as well as to the inherent polysemy of words:

In Greek, ‘pneuma,’ the word we translate ‘ghost,’ means either wind or breath, and the relative word ‘psyche’ has, perhaps, a more subtle power; yet St. Paul’s words ‘pneumatic body’ and ‘psychic body’ involve a difference in his mind which no words will explain. But in Greek and in English and in Saxon and in Hebrew, and in every articulate tongue of humanity, the ‘spirit of man’ truly means his passion and virtue, and is stately according to the height of his conception, and stable according to the measure of his endurance. (*Works XIX: 352*)

Even as Ruskin claims to know and articulate what this central idea “truly means,” his etymological work highlights nuanced possibilities that resist translation—the subtle conceptual differences that “no words will explain.” His recognition of these subtleties conditions his entire approach to the project of definition. Just prior to his remarks about the various words for *spirit*, he cautions his audience, “Beware of always contending for words: you will find them not easy to grasp, if you know them in several languages” (*Works XIX: 352*). The basic idea that words are not easy to grasp re-emerges throughout Ruskin’s own attempts to describe and delimit his subject matter throughout this lecture series, conditioning his authorial stance in surprising ways.

Ruskin’s plan for the second and third lectures, given at the end of “Athena Chalinitis,” frames his discussion as provisional and incomplete. Admitting that a full consideration of Athena’s moral significance remains “quite beyond the scope” of his present project, he ventures that the next lectures “will at least endeavour . . . to define some of the actual truths respecting the vital force in creative organism, and inventive

fancy in the works of man.” An editorial footnote appended by Ruskin states that the volume’s following two sections attempt to do so “in mere outline” (*Works* XIX: 346). As these phrases emphasize, Ruskin’s attempts “to define” are, paradoxically, not definitive: instead, they are partial attempts to participate in an ongoing process of offering a fuller articulation of meaning.

This model of definition distinguishes Ruskin’s conceptual and lexical work in *The Queen of the Air* from the rhetorical tactic of definition that Landow identifies as “a chief device” of the Victorian sage. According to Landow, the sage’s “intellectual stature” derives from “the asserted fact that he alone can use language correctly” (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 116). For example, Landow highlights Arnold’s definition of *culture* at the opening to *Culture and Anarchy*: Arnold ridicules “the culture which is supposed to plumb itself on a smattering of Greek and Latin” as not recognizable as culture by any “serious man” and insists that “properly defined,” culture is “a *study of perfection*” (qtd. in Landow 121-23). Conversely, Ruskin’s definitions work less to correct his audience’s understanding than to enlarge it.

Ruskin’s approach to questions of definition reflects his responses both to philological scholarship and to the higher criticism’s work of challenging literalism. Departing once again from Müller, who claimed that all myths derive from the worship of the sun, his emphasis on Athena’s presence in the air and wind likely reflects the influence of “the potent Romantic image of the creative breeze,” as Dinah Birch suggests (“Ruskin, Myth, and Modernism” 36-37). This representation of Athena as creative breeze—in effect, as Holy Spirit—recalls the theological issue of inspiration that rose to the forefront of British debates about the higher criticism, from Samuel Taylor

Coleridge's *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840) (originally entitled "Letters on the Inspiration of the Scriptures") to Jowett's contribution to *Essays and Reviews* ("On the Inspiration of Scripture"). As Charles LaPorte explains, both Coleridge and Jowett adapted a version of Herder's principle that biblical texts should be read *menschlich* ("in the human way"), thus advancing versions of the basic claim "that religious inspiration lies in a text's literary qualities, rather than its divine origins" (*Victorian Poets* 6-7). Ruskin's recovery of the imaginative language of mythmaking advances similarly expansive concepts of inspiration and revelation.

In his esteem for the myths about Athena's presence and activity throughout nature, Ruskin assigns to these myths a revelatory power, albeit a cryptic one. Setting aside the scholarly preoccupation with the "interpretation of human myths," Ruskin prioritizes "natural myths," which he calls "the dark sayings of nature" (*Works* XIX: 361). His phrasing evokes the description of "the words of the wise" as "dark sayings" in the opening to the Book of Proverbs (1:6), thus positioning the natural theology he articulates and defends in *The Queen of the Air* as a kind of wisdom writing. Indeed, Ruskin implies that his representation of personified Wisdom might be understood as a kind of parable (cf. Psalm 78:2, "I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old").<sup>180</sup> His recourse to biblical wisdom literature informs the particular kind of didacticism that emerges in *The Queen of the Air*. Remarking on the differences between "Ruskin's moralizing" and that of Thomas Carlyle, identified as his "most

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<sup>180</sup> Ruskin's contemporary Charles Kingsley similarly uses the language of parable in *Madam How and Lady Why: First Lessons of Earth Lore for Children* (serialized in *Good Words for the Young* from November 1868 to October 1869). Kingsley attempts to reconcile science and religion in the two figures of Madam How and Lady Why, quoting directly from the descriptions of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 and Job 28 to personify "her whom, as in a parable, I have called Lady Why" (49).

immediate prophetic antecedent,” Levine argues that Ruskin “loved the visible world, as Carlyle, in his inherited Calvinism, could not” (“Ruskin, Darwin, and the Matter of Matter” 236). In addition to its approach to a kind of Romantic pantheism, then, *The Queen of the Air* departs from the prophetic paradigm that Levine identifies in both Ruskin and Carlyle. Just as Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* ventures beyond the prophetic paradigm and turns instead to wisdom literature, as discussed in my introduction, so also *The Queen of the Air* relies primarily on forms of wisdom literature rather than prophecy.

Any effort to define *The Queen of the Air* as wisdom writing must recognize the intersection of prophecy and wisdom, both in Ruskin’s writings and in the religious traditions that he adapts. Ruskin approaches the prophetic voice in his preface to *The Queen of the Air*, when he laments the destruction of his beloved alpine landscape: “the air which once inlaid the clefts of all their golden crags with azure, is now defiled with languid coils of smoke, belched from worse than volcanic fires: their very glacier waves are, and their snows fading, as if Hell had breathed on them” (*Works* XIX: 293). These apocalyptic images anticipate Ruskin’s *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884), a jeremiad denouncing Britain’s environmental and moral degradation.

Nevertheless, the genres of prophecy and wisdom have distinctive theological emphases and embed different models of religious revelation, as has been discussed more fully in my introduction. Ricoeur underscores that prophetic literature, where “the prophet presents himself as not speaking in his own name, but in the name of another, the name of Yahweh,” generates “the idea of scripture as something dictated, as something whispered in someone’s ear” (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 76). Conversely, as Ricoeur explains, wisdom literature “overflows the framework” of the “promise made to Israel”

and offers a dialectical model of revelation and concealment (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 85).<sup>181</sup> In both its cosmological scope and in its emphasis on poetic truths that are incompletely perceived, *The Queen of the Air* adapts this wisdom literature.

As a result of his poetic approach, Ruskin’s attempts at definition eventuate not in a precise glossary of terms but in metaphorical conceits. He justifies his personification of Wisdom by claiming that “whatever intellectual results may be in modern days obtained by regarding this effluence only as a motion or vibration, every formative human art hitherto, and the best states of human happiness and order, have depended on the apprehension of its mystery (which is certain), and of its personality (which is probable)” (*Works* XIX: 378). Ruskin’s paradoxically resonant concept of a *certain mystery* calls attention to what cannot be comprehended rationally. By emphasizing ongoing participation in this effort to perceive and articulate the truths of ancient stories, he ultimately directs attention away from his own authorial work and toward that performed by his audience and readers.

### **A Sage in Dialogue: Reaching Toward the Reader**

In his direct addresses to the readers of *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin alternately emphasizes his own writerly authority and foregrounds readerly activity. As he moves between self-assurance regarding his own claims and openness to the reader’s interpretive and creative work, he generates a complex ethos that pushes against the limits of what Landow identifies as the “appeal to credibility” that “subsumes the sage’s other rhetorical devices” (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 155). According to Landow, “the writings

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<sup>181</sup> Perdue similarly observes that biblical wisdom literature finds its conceptual basis in creation theology rather than in the narrative of salvific history that characterizes prophecy (*Wisdom and Creation* 19).

of the sage are unique in that their central or basic rhetorical effect is the implicit statement to the audience: ‘I deserve your attention and credence, for I can be trusted . . . [my interpretations] are correct and they are necessary to your well-being’” (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 155). Landow’s discussion of the various persuasive strategies that follow from this assertion highlights the hierarchical relationship between sage and audience that his paradigm presupposes. Throughout *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin moves away from such exalted self-assurance, toward a more dialogical voice.

The element of dialogue that Ruskin weaves into this lecture series is both more subtle and more powerful than that employed in *The Ethics of the Dust* (1864), the work on crystallography and Egyptian mythology that both Birch and Sawyer identify as a precursor to *The Queen of the Air* (Birch, *Ruskin’s Myths* 92; Sawyer, *Ruskin’s Poetic Argument* 242). Written and published during the time that Ruskin taught at Winnington Hall, *The Ethics of the Dust* consists of ten dialogues between a group of young girls and an ancient Lecturer who instructs them in a variety of subjects.<sup>182</sup> Even though this volume bears the guise of a Socratic dialogue, the authoritative paternalism of the Lecturer, an obvious stand-in for Ruskin himself, is readily apparent; Birch argues that after *The Ethics of the Dust* Ruskin “abandoned the experiment of dialogue form” because it seemed “to admit too openly the presence of the author” (*Ruskin’s Myths* 92). Indeed, the appearance of dialogue does not necessarily produce a dialogic structure of openness, as Hans-Georg Gadamer highlights in his discussion of “the critical distinction between authentic and inauthentic dialogue” that he derives from Plato’s accounts of

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<sup>182</sup> Winnington Hall was a school for girls founded by Ruskin’s friend Margaret Alexis Bell. Ruskin lectured there throughout the 1860s and wrote letters addressed to the young girls. See Van Akin Burd (73-74).

Socrates (356). For Gadamer, authentic dialogue acknowledges the “*priority of the question*” and recognizes the counterintuitive insight that “it is more difficult to ask questions than answer them” (356-57). In *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin approaches a more genuinely interrogative mode through his reverence for mystery and his emphasis on the incompleteness of mythic expressions. As a result, the statements to and about the reader that punctuate this lecture series invite a greater degree of authentic dialogue than might first appear.

Ruskin’s third lecture, “Athena Ergane,” both the most didactic and the most digressive section of *The Queen of the Air*, overtly displays the complex and sometimes contradictory qualities of Ruskin’s authorial voice. Attempting to draw connections to his previous writings about art’s ethical value, Ruskin remarks that his “many years of endeavour to define the laws of art” have found expression “in so many partial ways, that the impression left on the reader’s mind—if, indeed, it was ever impressed at all—has been confused and uncertain” (*Works* XIX: 388). On the one hand, his self-deprecatory humour suggests a calculated rhetorical pose: as Landow argues, Ruskin’s occasional admissions of “weakness or error” throughout his writings function as “a way of winning the audience’s allegiance” (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 170).<sup>183</sup> On the other hand, Ruskin’s self-reflexive statements about his own work’s incompleteness align with his concept of truth as something that becomes clearer as a result of successive iterations. Moreover, *The Queen of the Air* shows Ruskin’s movement away from an understanding of the reader’s mind as

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<sup>183</sup> As an example, Landow highlights the note of apology on which Ruskin begins “Traffic,” a lecture on architectural design delivered at the Bradford town hall on 21 April 1864 (*Elegant Jeremiahs* 170-71).

a passive object to be impressed by the author's design and toward a more active concept of the reader's interpretive work.

Although Ruskin advances what initially seems to be a highly authoritarian kind of didacticism in a lecture embedded within "Athena Ergane," the very ideas expressed in this lecture invite a more dialogical model. Near the end of his discussion, Ruskin appends a talk entitled "The Hercules of Camarina," captioned as having been originally delivered "to the Students of the Art School of South Lambeth, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1869" (*Works* XIX: 410). His aim in this lecture is to intervene in the debate between those who claim "that Greek art is fine, because it is true" and those who claim "that Greek art is fine, because it is not true" (*Works* XIX: 410). After emphasizing his core principle of artistic realism ("*Greek art, and all other art, is fine when it makes a man's face as like a man's face as it can*"), Ruskin commands his listeners, "get that well driven into your heads; and don't let it out again, at your peril" (*Works* XIX: 411). Despite these heavy-handed terms, his instructions are far from final: he goes on to affirm that some aspects of art are decidedly "*unlike reality*" and derive their appeal from "quite other qualities than imitative ones" (*Works* XIX: 411). Even as Ruskin favours the arguments of the first party in this artistic debate, his lecture illustrates the more nuanced position that "neither of them are wrong" (*Works* XIX: 410)—put another way, that two seemingly contradictory statements both contain elements of truth, which readers must then discern for themselves.

Elsewhere in *The Queen of the Air*, Ruskin emphasizes the riddling qualities of his subject matter and draws attention to the reader's activity. At the close of "Athena Keramitis," he reflects that the reader's understanding must supplement the gaps in his

own authorial expressions. Ruskin remarks that though it would take him many more days to fully “disentangle” his subject matter, “the reader” may nonetheless be able both to “follow” and to “reanimate” the “vestiges of the Myth of Athena” that he has presented (*Works* XIX: 385). His use of the verb “reanimate” emphasizes that it is the reader who breathes new life into old stories. As Kevin A. Morrison observes, *The Queen of the Air* marks an important shift in Ruskin’s model of reading insofar as this text focuses “not on the authorially determined meaning of a text but rather on the readerly experience of it” (127). Morrison contrasts *The Queen of the Air* with Ruskin’s argument in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) that “what is rightly called ‘reading’” involves “putting ourselves into the author’s place, annihilating our own personality, and seeking to enter into his” (qtd. in Morrison 127). Both Ruskin’s initial recourse to and his subsequent departure from this model indicate his complex response to higher critical hermeneutics.

The basic paradigm that Ruskin upholds in *Sesame and Lilies* aligns with Schleiermacher’s emphasis on the importance of putting oneself in the place of the author (*Hermeneutics and Criticism* 24), as well as with Jowett’s more particular claim that a biblical text “has one meaning—the meaning which it had to the mind of the prophet or evangelist who first uttered or wrote it” (505). Yet even though Schleiermacher and Jowett aim to recover authorial intention, they also draw attention to the difficulty of doing so. Schleiermacher emphasizes the ambiguity and misunderstanding that make hermeneutics an endless task (*Hermeneutics and Criticism* 227-46); likewise, Jowett suggests that some passages of scripture, including the parables of Jesus, require a significant degree of “depth and inwardness” in “the interpreter himself” (503). Ruskin’s movement towards the reader, then, goes beyond both Schleiermacher and Jowett, though

not as far as MacDonald does in “The Fantastic Imagination” (1867), as discussed in chapter 2. Discounting intentionality altogether, MacDonald affirms that the reader’s interpretation of his fairy tales “may be superior” to the one that he had in mind as the author (326). While Ruskin does not directly address the question of authorial intent in *The Queen of the Air*, these lectures align with some of MacDonald’s ideas in their emphasis on the reader’s disposition. Just as MacDonald’s essay claims that his writings are not for children but “for the childlike” (326), so also Ruskin conceptualizes right interpretation as a function of the reader’s inner state.

For Ruskin, the reader’s attitude makes possible art’s didactic capacity: art can convey its message “just so far as we are of the temper in which it must be received” (*Works* XIX: 395). He further emphasizes the reader’s disposition by declaring that “all lovely art” is “rooted in virtue” and “full of myths that can be read only with the heart” (*Works* XIX: 394). His phrasing echoes Jowett’s claim in “On the Interpretation of Scripture” that biblical texts must be read “in the light of the human heart” (503).<sup>184</sup> For both Ruskin and Jowett, interpretation involves an inward process of understanding and transformation. As Ruskin sees it, the process of forming wisdom does not require correctness of argument; instead, it requires a full-bodied ethical commitment that is experienced both aesthetically and affectively.

In effect, these statements about the reader’s heart align with the attitude that Ruskin claims for both himself and his ideal reader at the beginning of his first lecture.

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<sup>184</sup> Jowett formulates this subjectivist model of reading as part of his rejection of ecclesiastical authority. See Nixon’s argument about Jowett’s self-positioning against “the political, propagandistic, and bureaucratic machine that drives theological traditions and interpretive hegemonies” (71).

Ruskin distinguishes his approach to mythology from that of “the Divine” as well as that of “the Philologist” in the following terms:

It is the task of the Divine to condemn the errors of antiquity, and of the Philologist to account for them: I will only pray you to read, with patience, and human sympathy, the thoughts of men who lived without blame in a darkness they could not dispel. (*Works* XIX: 296)

While Ruskin’s statement about “darkness” in this context refers specifically to the past, his overarching concept of myth as a mode that “perceives . . . darkly” indicates that this imaginative and imperfect understanding is a condition that pertains equally to the past and the present (*Works* XIX: 310). His affirmation of “patience” and “human sympathy” foreshadows his later statements about the “myths that can be read only with the heart,” as well as his claim that Athena embodies “wisdom of conduct and of the heart” (*Works* XIX: 394, 303). As Ruskin suggests, the task of the wisdom writer, unlike that of “the Divine” or “the Philologist,” consists of pondering dark sayings and seeing in them the reflection of enduring human truths. Moreover, this task of character formation depends on the capacity to sympathize with limited understanding and to see such limitation as the grounds for ethical and creative engagement.

### **Didacticism and Imperfection: Ruskin and the Value of Error**

Taken together, Ruskin’s self-reflexive remarks about the limits of knowledge throughout *The Queen of the Air* offer a subtle reconsideration of what it means to be mistaken. At first glance, his statements on this subject appear fraught with contradictions: in places, he acknowledges error as inescapable, but, elsewhere, he presents error as something to be avoided at all costs. These seeming contradictions, however, allow him to achieve nuance and to draw a distinction between being wrong (as in having incomplete or imperfect understanding) and doing wrong (as in acting

foolishly).<sup>185</sup> As Ruskin puts it, Athena “does not make men learned, but prudent and subtle” (*Works* XIX: 388). While Ruskin suggests that the state of having limited knowledge plays a crucial role in the process of forming wisdom, he assigns to intellectual error a value that cannot be easily quantified or reduced to a systematic, scientific method of trial and error.

In his preface to this lecture series, added for its volume publication in May 1869, Ruskin offers a personal note that underscores both the difficulties he experienced in writing *The Queen of the Air* and his commitment to working through imperfect material:

My days and strength have lately been much broken; and I never more felt the insufficiency of both than in preparing for the press the following desultory memorabilia on a most noble subject. But I leave them now as they stand, for no time nor labour would be enough to complete them to my contentment. (*Works* XIX: 291)

Ruskin at once admits his inability to offer anything more than “desultory memorabilia” and resolves that the task of writing “on a most noble subject” must by its very nature remain incomplete, even in the best of circumstances. This frank confession of weakness was not merely a pose: Ruskin suffered from intense periods of depression in 1868 and 1869, as Batchelor observes (219). In addition to these personal considerations, Ruskin claims that mistakes are inescapable given the kind of inquiry undertaken. As he says later in the preface, “absolutely right no one can be in such matters; nor does a day pass without convincing every honest student of antiquity of some partial error, and showing him better how to think, and where to look” (*Works* XIX: 291-92). Even as Ruskin recognizes that a perfect understanding of mythology is impossible, the inexhaustibility of his subject does not prompt him to abandon its pursuit. The inevitable discovery of

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<sup>185</sup> Ruskin’s distinction between objective knowledge and moral knowledge reflects the Aristotelian emphasis that Sawyer discusses as characteristic of *Modern Painters* (*Ruskin’s Poetic Argument* 37, 47-48).

“some partial error” serves to drive further investigation; intellectual mistakes, then, are not fatal but part of a larger process of discovery.

While Ruskin indicates that *being wrong* is not only unavoidable but potentially instructive, he emphatically protests against the perils of *doing wrong* throughout “Athena Ergane.”<sup>186</sup> Within this lecture, Ruskin offers a critique of “Mr. Mill’s essay on Liberty” (John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, published in 1859), which he says contains “some important truths” but omits “many, quite vital” truths (*Works* XIX: 127). Ruskin parodies “the arguments for liberty” by expressing them as corrupted proverbs, such as “if the blind lead the blind, both fall into the ditch; therefore, nobody should lead anybody” (*Works* XIX: 128). Putting his case more directly, he insists, “No one ever gets wiser by doing wrong . . . . You will get wiser and stronger only by doing right, whether forced or not” (*Works* XIX: 125). He then introduces an interlocutor, a “wayward youth” who responds incredulously, “Shall I not know the world best by trying the wrong of it, and repenting? Have I not, even as it is, learned much by many of my errors?” (*Works* XIX: 125-26). Although Ruskin concedes that “in the pain and the repentance . . . you have learned *something*,” he concludes, “how much less than you would have learned in right paths, can never be told, but that it *is* less is certain” (*Works* XIX: 126). This affirmation of certainty contradicts his overall emphasis on mystery, as his refusal to entertain genuine dialogue shows him at his most like Landow’s authoritarian sage. Read

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<sup>186</sup> Ruskin’s approach to aesthetics and ethics bears a noteworthy resemblance to Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), originally delivered in the 1998 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Cambridge University. Scarry’s book articulates and defends broadly Platonic ideas and is divided into two parts (“On Beauty and Being Wrong” and “On Beauty and Being Fair”).

in the context of Ruskin's critique of utilitarianism, however, these statements serve primarily to highlight his rejection of instrumentalist ideas of value.

Ruskin's objections to utilitarianism in *The Queen of the Air* revisit the arguments that he had advanced in *Unto This Last*, a series of essays serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine* in the fall of 1860 and published as a volume in 1862. Arguing against Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), Ruskin writes much in the spirit of Carlyle; his critique of what Carlyle called "the Dismal Science" employs extravagant, organic metaphors to counter what both thinkers saw as a damaging emphasis on mechanization.<sup>187</sup> As his title indicates, Ruskin makes inventive use of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard to articulate his ideas about economy (cf. Matthew 20:14, "I will give unto this last, even as unto thee"). Calling for "wise consumption," Ruskin argues that the terms *money* and *wealth* are not synonymous, emphatically concluding, "THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE" (*Works* XVII: 98-105). In "Athena Ergane," Ruskin reiterates this distinction, in a more compressed form (*Works* XIX: 402-6). Furthermore, his lectures on Athena develop the concept of value that Ruskin shows in *Unto This Last* to pertain not simply to material goods but to a state of being.

Ruskin refers to the material sense of *value* in his brief remarks about money, where he states that "all money is a divisible title-deed, of immense importance as an expression of right to property; but absolutely valueless, as property itself" (*Works* XIX:

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<sup>187</sup> Carlyle coined the term "the Dismal Science" in 1849, and his basic contrast between the "mechanical" qualities of the economist and the scientist, on the one hand, and the "dynamical" energy of the artist and poet, on the other, emerges in such early essays as "Signs of the Times" (1829). Ruskin's organic metaphors are apparent from the very titles of his first two essays in *Unto This Last* ("The Roots of Honour" and "The Veins of Wealth"), which evoke trees and circulatory systems. These forms of life refuse to be contained by the rigid mathematics that Ruskin identifies in political economy, which sets the wages of domestic labour at the lowest possible rate with the aim of extracting as much work as possible.

402-3); however, his discussion of mythology draws on an expanded sense of value as fullness of experience. As Ruskin claims, the personified Wisdom that persists over time and migrates across religious traditions has “a vague poetical influence of the highest value in its own imaginative way” (*Works* XIX: 367). For Ruskin, the value of mythmaking’s imprecise and artistic work, emanating as it does from incomplete understanding, possesses a worth of the highest degree and of an altogether unique kind. This imaginative concept of value can accommodate “desultory memorabilia on a most noble subject,” as Ruskin calls his own writing (*Works* XIX: 291), because it is concerned less with accuracy than with possibility. To evoke Northrop Frye’s distinction between knowledge and wisdom (*The Great Code* 122), this concept of value is concerned less with the actual than with the potential.

Insofar as Ruskin acknowledges epistemic limitation yet refuses to become complacent with error, his pursuit of wisdom aligns with the aesthetic of the imperfect that he advances in “The Nature of Gothic.” Although this earlier text draws a clear antithesis between Grecian and Gothic art, *The Queen of the Air*, in its attempt to integrate various wisdom traditions, incorporates within Ruskin’s discussion of Greek mythology some of his ideas about Gothic architecture’s grotesque irregularities. Ruskin’s effort to reconcile his arguments on this subject becomes evident in his explanation of why he attempts to trace Athena “in the Greek mind” rather than in “Greek art”: he claims that the “triumphs” of Greek art obscure “the religious passion,” which “can be traced only through the efforts of trembling hands, and the strange pleasures of untaught eyes” (*Works* XIX: 384). By implication, then, Ruskin finds the equivalent of such “trembling hands” in the mythological vision that “perceives, however

darkly, things which are for all ages true” (*Works* XIX: 310). As Ruskin puts it in “The Nature of Gothic,” the flawed majesty of such artwork indicates that “*the demand for perfection is always a sign of the misunderstanding of the ends of art*” (*Works* X: 202). His arresting phrase “*the ends of art*” signals purposiveness rather than termination. For Ruskin, “*the ends of art*” find expression in the laws of “Effort” and “Mercy” that govern human life and judgement (*Works* X: 203-4). These laws are less prescriptive than invitational: effort and mercy are values to strive for, not quotas to meet.

By affirming such acts of striving, *The Queen of the Air* emphasizes that the search for wisdom is always ongoing. This dynamic model of spiritual growth invites a re-reading of Ruskin’s *Praeterita*, his chapter “The Grande Chartreuse” in particular, which Ruskin introduces as “the tale of [his] final apostacy from Puritan doctrine” (*Works* XXXV: 492). In this chapter, Ruskin recounts the events of one Sunday morning in Turin during the spring of 1858: after overhearing and disregarding a sermon on the world’s wickedness, he walks “back into the condemned city” and visits an art gallery to view Paul Veronese’s *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* (c. 1584). Viewing this painting prompts Ruskin to understand all “things done delightfully and rightly” as “done by the help and in the Spirit of God,” an epiphany that he says “only concluded the courses of thought which had been leading [him] to such an end throughout many years” (*Works* XXXV: 496). Rather like the title character in Eliot’s *Romola*, Ruskin experiences this moment not as a dramatic reversal of the apostle Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus but as one of a series of clarifying moments. This concept of revelation in process aligns not only with the texts that I have analyzed previously but also with Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), the subject of my fifth and final

chapter. As my discussion will show, Schreiner's fragmentary and semi-autobiographical novel does not conform to linear pattern of faith lost or found; instead, Schreiner offers a complex model of spiritual development that issues from a dialectical combination of skepticism and reverence.

## Chapter 5: Wisdom's Breath: Gathering Dust and Dreams in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*

The daughter of Methodist evangelists to South Africa, Olive Schreiner rejected her religious upbringing as early as 1864, or so the story goes. Retrospectively, Schreiner reported that the death of her baby sister Ellie led her, as a nine-year-old child, to question the tenets of Christianity.<sup>188</sup> By 1881, when she travelled from the Cape Colony to Britain, she publicly identified herself as a “freethinker,” a term adopted by a broad range of those critical of organized religion. Even so, Schreiner’s letters and novels demonstrate that her rejection of Christian doctrines coexisted with an intensive re-reading of biblical texts. This coexistence appears tellingly in a letter to Havelock Ellis, whom she met in England and corresponded with almost daily throughout the 1880s:

^Please buy & send me a bible, as like my old one in size & print as you can. It was one of those cheap bibles published by the ^British & ^Foreign Bible Society. Not with the very fine print.^

I am always quoting from the bible sometimes for the devil’s own purposes & I find as the years pass my memory sometimes wavers with regard to an exact ^wording of a^ passage (3 November 1888, ll. 34-35)<sup>189</sup>

On the one hand, Schreiner’s statement that she no longer holds this book in her possession, as well as her nod to “the devil’s own purposes,” distances her from Christianity. On the other hand, her nostalgic desire to recover this book, particularly in a

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<sup>188</sup> Schreiner’s parents, Gottlob Schreiner and Rebecca Lyndall, were sponsored first by the London Missionary Society (1838–46) and then by the Wesleyan Missionary society (1846–65). See Joyce Avrech Berkman’s discussion of Schreiner’s response to Ellie’s death and her subsequent questioning of Christian doctrines (12-14).

<sup>189</sup> Since 2012, Schreiner’s letters have become available in full digital transcriptions through the *Olive Schreiner Letters Online*; for ease of reference, I cite them parenthetically by date and line numbers. My quotations replicate the notations used in the transcriptions to indicate marginal or interlinear additions.

familiar form that would aid her re-reading, suggests that her habit of “always quoting from the bible” issues from thoughtful, personal study.

These two elements—reading for critique and reading for appreciation—inform Schreiner’s re-writing of biblical texts throughout her semi-autobiographical *The Story of an African Farm*, published by Chapman and Hall in January 1883. Drawing from Schreiner’s own memories of her early life on a Wesleyan mission station in Wittebergen, this best-selling novel raises an enormously wide range of religious and intellectual issues in a very compressed way, as readers have long recognized. Writing for the *Fortnightly Review* in December 1883, Henry Norman remarked, “Orthodox Christianity, Unitarian Christianity, woman suffrage, marriage, Malthusianism, immortality – they all arise, though not with these names, over the horizon of this African farm” (69). Subsequent criticism has amplified this catalogue, drawing attention to the novel’s implication in British imperialism, as well as its complex narrative form. Jed Etsy usefully captions this sprawl, classifying the novel as “one part South African *plaasroman* (farm-novel), one part New Woman fiction, one part Dickensian farce . . . one part naturalist tragedy . . . one part colonial Gothic, one part Victorian melodrama, one part allegorical tale, one part satire of provincial manners, one part spiritual autobiography, and one part neo-Transcendental novel of ideas” (407). To provide a framework for analyzing this conceptual and generic miscellany, my chapter situates *The Story of an African Farm* in relation to the interpretive shifts initiated by nineteenth-century biblical scholars. Just as biblical higher criticism challenged the ideas of theological unity and verbal inspiration that accepted exegetical frameworks such as typology and literalism presupposed, so Schreiner’s novel interrogates the idea that

religious revelation consists in literal divine dictation. Instead, her text unfolds a range of dynamic possibilities for re-reading the Bible as literature.

My focus on these debates about biblical interpretation aims to recover a crucial yet neglected context for understanding Schreiner's critique of organized religion. From Canon MacColl's 1887 review praising *The Story of an African Farm* as a novel that "looks Agnosticism fairly in the face" (72) to twentieth- and twenty-first-century reassessments of Schreiner's turn away from organized religion, many studies approach her work primarily as a response to the agnosticism articulated by Herbert Spencer. This approach has considerable warrant, given the clear admiration for Spencer's writings that Schreiner repeatedly expressed throughout her letters and journals.<sup>190</sup> Nevertheless, this emphasis overlooks the extent to which Schreiner's writings were informed by her careful reading of biblical higher criticism and her desire to participate creatively in its interpretive work. In *The Story of an African Farm*, she engages with this hermeneutic project through the reading practices exemplified in her various characters, as well as in the narrative form of the novel itself. Taken together, both the biblical exegesis *depicted in the novel* and the biblical exegesis *performed by the novel* challenge dogmatic claims to certainty and invite the reader's participation in an ongoing search for meaning. As a result, *The Story of an African Farm* offers more than a satire of Christian institutions: it advances a series of provocative re-readings of Christianity's sacred texts, re-readings that draw heavily from biblical wisdom literature.

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<sup>190</sup> For recent critical discussions that highlight Schreiner's intellectual debt to Spencer, see Berkman (20), Gerald Monsman (82), and Carolyn Burdett (42). Spencer's *First Principles* (1862) had a particularly formative influence on Schreiner when she first read it at the age of sixteen, as Berkman explains (20).

Schreiner's sustained meditation on biblical wisdom literature becomes most apparent in her novel's central chapter. Entitled "Times and Seasons," this chapter's clear echoing of the prose poem that opens the third chapter of Ecclesiastes ("To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven") has elicited brief commentary from several critics; however, I argue that Schreiner's turn to this wisdom literature is more than a passing literary allusion or even a recurring thematic motif.<sup>191</sup> Rather, the fragmentary, dialogic, and self-reflexive form of *The Story of an African Farm* offers a novelistic adaptation of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Like Ecclesiastes, this episodic novel uses a series of dialectical pairings and contrasts to explore issues of meaning-making and meaninglessness. Broadly speaking, Schreiner's novel is a two-part *bildungsroman* that follows two protagonists, Lyndall and Waldo, from childhood to their untimely deaths in early adulthood. The novel focuses on the interactions among various characters: Lyndall (the beautiful and intelligent niece of Tant' Sannie, the Boer woman who has charge of her and her cousin Em, as well as the titular farm), Waldo (the daydreaming son of the farm's German overseer, Otto), and a series of minor characters whose coming and goings make up the story's action. These characters include Bonaparte Blenkins, the Irish con artist whose manipulative manoeuvres dominate the novel's first part, and Gregory Rose, the melancholic Englishman who becomes a secondary focal point in the second part. Schreiner interweaves these characters' attempts to make sense of the world that they read and experience with her own interpretive commentary.

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<sup>191</sup> Both Joseph Bristow (xvi) and John Kucich (97) briefly remark Schreiner's recourse to Ecclesiastes, though without considering this intertext as a central aspect of the novel's form.

This commentary appears in a particularly concentrated form in the “Times and Seasons” chapter. Bridging the novel’s two parts, this chapter extrapolates from the spiritual struggles of Waldo to consider the broader question of “the soul’s life” (101). Here, Schreiner describes the soul’s growth through apparent contradictions, from the nihilistic statement “in truth, nothing matters” (115) to the hopeful, mystical assertion “nothing is despicable—all is meaning-full; nothing is small—all is part of a whole, whose beginning and end we know not” (118). These statements echo the paradoxes that emerge throughout Ecclesiastes: although punctuated with the haunting and seemingly pessimistic refrain (“vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity”), this book nevertheless suggests that God has “made everything beautiful in its time,” though “no man can find out the work that God has done from beginning to end” (3:11). As I suggest, the Ecclesiastes intertexts provide an opportunity to reconsider the series of dyads that animate *The Story of an African Farm*, from its dual protagonists to the uncanny symmetry of its two parts to its stylistic synthesis of idealism and realism. While other studies have examined the novel’s pairings in relation to the doublings that are characteristic of the Victorian multiplot novel, I situate them in relation to the dialectical patterning of Ecclesiastes.<sup>192</sup> Encapsulated in the antithetical parallelism of the prose poem that opens with the line “a time to be born, and a time to die” (3:2), this patterning appears throughout the entire book of Ecclesiastes and re-emerges in Schreiner’s novel.

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<sup>192</sup> See, for example, Berkman’s argument that Schreiner’s reading of Victorian novels including those by Charles Dickens and by the Brontë sisters “molded her cultural critiques and moral idealism” (20). More broadly, John Kucich situates Schreiner’s style in relation to both “conventional narrative forms” such as “the bildungsroman plot, or the Dickensian orphan plot” and “the rhetorical devices of biblical narrative,” though without focusing on the particular dialectical structure of Ecclesiastes (97).

My subtitle (“Gathering Dust and Dreams”) highlights the biblical images evoked by Schreiner and underscores one of her novel’s distinctive formal qualities: its assembly of many different and, at times, conflicting, voices and philosophies of life. This quality appears in the very title of Ecclesiastes. As scholars from the nineteenth century to the present day have noted, the Hebrew word for the book’s title and speaker, “Qohelet,” vexes English translation; however, its resemblance to the Hebrew root *q-h-l* (gather, flock) has led most commentators to highlight the concepts of gathering or assembling. In a two-volume critical introduction to the Old Testament published in 1817, Wilhelm Martin Leberecht De Wette translated the title as “*speaker in the assembly*” (2:548), while Robert Alter’s recent commentary *The Wisdom Books* (2010) proposes “the one who assembles” (337).<sup>193</sup> The book’s work of assembling, expressed in compact form in the antithetical parallelism of its third chapter, foregrounds the combination of opposites, as readers from De Wette (2: 549) to Alter (*The Wisdom Books* 340) have recognized. This work of gathering invites an interpretive approach that abandons the logical principle of non-contradiction and instead finds meaning within paradox and irresolution. Such is the reading method that Schreiner advances in her novel: her critique of Christianity proceeds not to discredit its sacred texts but to dialogize them, not to overturn the biblical wisdom tradition but to intensify it.

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<sup>193</sup> As Alter remarks, the uncertainty about how to translate *Qohelet* “has led most modern [biblical] scholars to use the untranslated Hebrew name” (*The Wisdom Books* 337). While I follow the habit of most literary critics in calling this book “Ecclesiastes,” I use “Qohelet” (rather than “the Preacher,” as the Authorized Translation renders it) when referring to its speaker. My use of the word “gathering” to highlight the energy of assembling in Ecclesiastes works connotatively with the book’s place in the *Megilloth* (festival scrolls). In the Jewish tradition, Ecclesiastes is read for *Sukkot* (the Feast of Tabernacles), celebrated during the harvest.

My discussion begins by situating Schreiner's novelistic adaptation of Ecclesiastes in relation to her unique expression of freethought, informed as it was by biblical higher criticism. I argue that her *bildungsroman* advances an eclectic mode of spiritual autobiography that has much in common with Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), examined briefly in my introduction. I then show that Schreiner's model of selfhood informs her novel's feminism in challenging but potentially productive ways. Even as Schreiner's concept of self-formation frustrates feminist paradigms based in self-actualization, she challenges patriarchal hierarchies and reaches toward an expansive model of sympathetic community. Her novel's response to the British imperial project is similarly complex: despite her complicity in this project, her innovative use of biblical wisdom literature challenges important components of imperialistic rhetoric. Schreiner develops this resistance through her authorial positioning, which both engages with and departs from the prophetic, Carlylean model of Victorian sage writing that has formed the backdrop for my larger study. *The Story of an African Farm* parodies prophetic claims to certainty and advances an alternative interpretive model that finds compressed and telling expression in Schreiner's parable, "The Hunter," embedded just after the chapter on "Times and Seasons." Through the twofold vision of hope and bleakness that concludes this parable as well as the novel itself, Schreiner self-reflexively probes both the possibilities and the limitations of her revisions to religious discourse. These revisions epitomize the work of creative interpretation that my study has traced in Victorian responses to the higher criticism.

## Generative Skepticism and Spiritual Autobiography

As its title implies, *The Story of an African Farm* draws heavily on Schreiner's own memories of her early life on a Wesleyan mission station in Wittebergen, South Africa. Schreiner composed this novel while working as a governess in the Cape Colony in the late 1870s; following her journey to Southampton in 1881 and her disappointed hopes of becoming a medical doctor, she sent this manuscript to Chapman and Hall, who accepted it on the recommendation of reader George Meredith.<sup>194</sup> Not surprisingly, many critics highlight the autobiographical qualities of *The Story of an African Farm*. Ruth First and Ann Scott, for instance, claim that though the "Times and Seasons" chapter is "mediately directly through Waldo" it really "describes Olive's religious development" (58). Situating this trajectory in relation to a wider cultural trend, Mike Kissack and Michael Titlestad claim that "Schreiner's intellectual development replicated the kind of crisis of faith experienced by many thoughtful individuals in literary, scientific, and philosophical circles during the nineteenth century," listing John Ruskin and George Eliot among their examples (33). As I have suggested in chapters 3 and 4, however, this "crisis of faith" model risks obscuring the more complex development that becomes evident when one examines more closely the lives and writings of these Victorian intellectuals. So, too, Schreiner's turn away from institutionalized Christianity merits careful analysis. The need to re-examine the Victorian "crisis of faith" has become all the more apparent as a result of recent interdisciplinary debates about the limitations of accepted secularization narratives, surveyed in my introduction.

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<sup>194</sup> See Ruth First and Ann Scott's discussion of this novel's composition and publication history (77, 112-18).

Schreiner's critique of organized Christianity, especially as represented in her experimental first novel, offers what is less an inversion of Christianity than a radical expansion of some of its more radical teachings. *The Story of an African Farm*, then, offers what is less a "loss of faith" novel (a subgenre first identified by Robert Lee Wolff's influential study *Gains and Losses*, published in 1977), than a novel that productively intertwines faith and doubt in response to biblical higher criticism.<sup>195</sup> To trace this intertwining, my discussion coordinates Schreiner's epistolary remarks about her own reading of the higher criticism with the elements of spiritual autobiography that emerge in her first novel. My analysis thus builds on Gerald Monsman's discussion of *The Story of an African Farm* as a "hermeneutic autobiography" in the tradition of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. As Monsman rightly emphasizes, both texts are "more directly focused on self-interpretation than on self-presentation, more concerned with understanding events than with narrating them" (*Olive Schreiner* 49). I argue that what results from this self-reflexive process of interpretation, refracted as it is through Schreiner's re-reading of biblical texts, is not the death of God but the revision of particular master narratives.

Although Schreiner's self-identification as a freethinker might appear to suggest hostility toward religion, her writings indicate that her skepticism was counterbalanced with openness to an ongoing process of spiritual searching. Between 1881 and 1889, the period of time when she lived in England, Schreiner actively participated in secular

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<sup>195</sup> Gerald Monsman provides further support for my claim when he observes that in *The Story of an African Farm* "doubt is not resolved in any conventional way, as for example it is in *Robert Elsemere*" (48). He thus contrasts this novel with Mary Augusta Ward's 1888 book, which has been identified as a classic example of the "loss of faith" subgenre in studies such as Wolff's.

societies including Karl Pearson's Men and Women's Club, which openly debated issues ranging from marriage to sexuality to religion; however, she did not fully endorse the rationalist rejection of divinity that many freethinkers did.<sup>196</sup> She joined the freethinkers in her moral critique of Christian doctrines such as original sin, substitutionary atonement, and eternal damnation but continued to uphold broadly mystical ideas about an immanent divine presence. Indeed, her "continued use of the word *God*" to describe this presence prompted criticism from her socialist and freethinking friends, as Joyce Avrech Berkman notes (61). Berkman further observes that, even though the novelist was by the 1890s "well-known for her denunciation of Christianity and espousal of freethought," she was regarded by the Reverend John T. Lloyd (a noted minister of the Presbyterian church in Kimberly, South Africa) as a "religious genius" (43). A letter sent from Schreiner to Lloyd on 29 October 1892 provides insight into Schreiner's mystical philosophy, as well as her qualified appreciation for particular biblical teachings. Even though she claimed that the only parts of "the teaching of Jesus" that informed her philosophy are "the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> chapters of Matthew"—that is, the Sermon on the Mount—she further speculated that "if we knew really what the beautiful soul of Jesus thought & felt, we should find it loved wider and deeper than its followers left us any record of" (ll. 103-4, 134-36). At the same time that Schreiner rejected canonical authority, then, her remarks about Jesus suggest an expansive vision of human charity

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<sup>196</sup> Berkman's thoughtful discussion of Schreiner's movement within these freethinking circles usefully highlights the elements of Schreiner's thought that distinguished her from her contemporaries (24-53). See also Laura Schwartz's analysis of how the rise of "esoteric and occult religions" such as theosophy contributed to the breakdown of the supposed "two camps" of "orthodox versus heterodox, Christian versus Secular" that more rationalist and atheistic freethinkers tried to maintain (20).

akin to the widened vision of “God’s kingdom” advanced in George Eliot’s *Romola* (1862–1863), as discussed in my third chapter.

Schreiner’s esteem for the higher critical project of challenging canonical authority and reassessing the person and work of Jesus is evident throughout her correspondence. In a letter to Ellis dated 19 April 1884, for instance, she praised both Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* (1835), which she read in Eliot’s translation, and Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (1862) (ll. 30-31). She even went so far as to say to Karl Pearson, “the dream of my life has been to create a life of Jesus (in verse),” a remark that plainly shows her desire to participate creatively in the higher critical project (12 June 1886, ll. 77-78). Her letters indicate that she shared with Eliot both an understanding of Jesus as a historical person and an appreciation for his radical reframing of religious and social community. She frequently expressed her disdain for religious institutions in terms that affirm, rather than detract from, the Gospel teachings. According to Schreiner, “all Christianity” is “so un-Jesus-like” (to Adela Villiers Smith, 9 April 1908, ll. 6-7); she further claimed that, “if Jesus were on the earth now it is very certain he would not be a Christian; but, as he was in his own day, a freethinker” (to Betty Molteno, 23 May 1900, ll. 23-25). More strongly still, she claimed that the statement attributed to Jesus “he that is greatest among you let him be as the servant of all”—a clear reference to Matthew 23:11—is “the finest text in the bible” (to Isie Smuts nee Krige, 1905, ll. 31-32).<sup>197</sup> Her own resistance to established hierarchies of class and power can be seen in her insistence on the low cost of *The Story of an African Farm*, sales of which reached nearly 100, 000 copies by the end of the

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<sup>197</sup> In the Authorized Version, this text reads, “But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:11).

century. As she explained in a letter to T. Fisher Unwin, who published most of Schreiner's works written after *The Story of an African Farm*, she had "insisted" to publishers Chapman and Hall that her novel be sold at the price of one shilling because she "wanted to feel sure boys like Waldo could buy a copy" (26 September 1892, ll. 34-36). This insistence suggests some indifference to profit, as well a strong ethical commitment and a statement about her novel's message.

While it is clearly not the poetic "life of Jesus" that Schreiner had envisioned, *The Story of an African Farm* offers a highly artistic portrait of the life of the soul, one that manages to be both playfully irreverent and deeply mystical. These qualities are subtly intimated in the pseudonym under which the novel first appeared: Ralph Iron. This pseudonym pays tribute to Schreiner's deep admiration of Ralph Waldo Emerson, as Monsman explains.<sup>198</sup> Monsman suggests that this pseudonymous surname evokes "Emerson's theme of self-reliance," as well as the biblical symbolism of the "pen of iron" that transcribes both the sins of Judah and the faith of Job (79-80).<sup>199</sup> He further proposes that *Iron* hints darkly at the novel's insistent and cosmic *irony*: the pseudonym both "gives the illusion of some final, ultimate voice" beyond the novel's "multivocal narrative structure" and "undercut[s] all pretense to final meaning" (81). In effect, Schreiner's pseudonym interrogates the notion of a single and stable authorial presence, much as Carlyle does in the Menippean satire that animates *Sartor Resartus*, a favourite work of Emerson. Much as Carlyle's text calls attention to the limits of both author and

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<sup>198</sup> Matthew Fike identifies Schreiner's naming of the character *Waldo* as another homage to Emerson (80).

<sup>199</sup> Schreiner's statement to Ellis a year after this novel was published that she regarded Emerson as "just like a Bible" lends credence to this interpretation of her pseudonym's symbolism (28 August 1884, l. 20). See also Berkman's discussion of both Emerson and the pluralistic mystic Emanuel Swedenborg as influences on Schreiner's thought (75).

editor's understanding, so also *The Story of an African Farm* implies that the views advanced by "Ralph Iron" may be no more legitimate than those put forth by any of the other flawed readers that the novel depicts.

Like *Sartor Resartus*, *The Story of an African Farm* advances a self-reflexive mode of writing that has much in common with the genre of spiritual autobiography—and even more in common with the Book of Ecclesiastes. This biblical book's composite and ironic qualities were brought into sharper relief as a result of the pressures exerted by the higher critical studies that challenged the allegorical readings of this text that sought to reconcile this seemingly irreverent book with a unified Christian canon. In place of the longstanding allegorical reading whereby Ecclesiastes constitutes Solomon's musings on the meaninglessness of a life without Christ, the higher critics called attention to the book's connections to Hellenistic skepticism.<sup>200</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, these findings were endorsed even by the comparatively more conservative Anglican divine and biblical critic Thomas Kelly Cheyne. His 1889 commentary on Ecclesiastes called the book "the work of a dark post-exilic period" (256); furthermore, his commentary not only questioned Solomonic authorship but also drew attention to the book's composite qualities, noting that the book's ostensibly more conservative epilogue

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<sup>200</sup> According to Richard Hess, this allegorical reading traces its roots to St. Jerome in the fourth century (480). Hess identifies Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette as the one who first broke with the tradition of Solomonic authorship in his *Beiträge zur Einleitung* (1806). De Wette, a disciple of Strauss, emphasized Qohelet's inclination "to skepticism, fatalism, and Epicureanism" and highlighted the "objectionable character" of the Book of Ecclesiastes (2: 547, 551). While the higher criticism brought the book's composite form into sharper relief, there are patristic readings that identify an element of dialogism in Ecclesiastes. Roland E. Murphy observes that, as early as the sixth century, Gregory the Great "saw Solomon as dialoguing with a fool or knave" ("The Sage in Ecclesiastes" 263).

(12:9-14) is likely an editorial addition (205, 236). According to Cheyne, Ecclesiastes carried a particular resonance in the late-Victorian era, with its rising agnosticism and growing disillusionment about progress. He cites examples of literary echoes of this book ranging from Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* to the poetry of Christina Rossetti (242-43). While he does not mention *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner's experimental novel clearly participates in this trend of re-reading of Ecclesiastes as an unruly poetic text.

More particularly, Schreiner's adaptations of the fragmentary form and skeptical wisdom of Ecclesiastes merit discussion in the context of late-Victorian feminist responses to the higher criticism. These responses used the higher criticism's findings to challenge Christianity's patriarchal ideologies and claim the Bible as a feminist text.<sup>201</sup> In one of the few studies to date to comment on Schreiner's response to developments in biblical hermeneutics, Galia Ofek argues that the "colliding, disharmonious narrative strands" that characterize *The Story of an African Farm* reflect Schreiner's responses to developments in biblical source criticism and attendant debates about canonicity (177). Whereas Ofek highlights the broader issues of literary and religious canons that are evident in the work of Schreiner and her contemporaries, my analysis focuses specifically on Schreiner's recourse to Ecclesiastes. As the following discussion will show, Ecclesiastes figures prominently in Lyndall's speech to Waldo on the Woman Question in the novel's second part. The most forceful feminist polemic in *The Story of an African*

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<sup>201</sup> Examples of such feminist revisionary work appeared in *The Women's Penny Paper* in the 1880s. Edited by Henrietta Müller, this paper published scriptural critiques that challenged misogynistic applications of Christianity (see Schwartz 146). In the following decade, the American suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton initiated a collaborative project entitled *The Women's Bible* (1895–1898), to which various academic and churchgoing women contributed. Proposed as an alternative to the Authorized Version, this project's focus on recovering apocryphal texts and reassessing the roles of women in biblical narratives challenged the older translation "ideologically, lexically, structurally, and formalistically," as Galia Ofek explains (166).

*Farm*, this passage merits close attention for both its admission of futility and its glimmers of hope. Schreiner's adaptations of Ecclesiastes at once express frustration with seemingly inescapable patriarchal hierarchies and yearn for an alternative paradigm for ordering relationships between men and women—and, indeed, among all living things.

### **“Under the Sun”: Resituating Feminism in *The Story of an African Farm***

*The Story of an African Farm* was recognized by Schreiner's contemporaries as an important feminist innovation, even though later readers have critiqued this novel's complicity with late-Victorian patriarchal ideologies. In a review published in 1894, the British journalist W. T. Stead hailed *The Story of an African Farm* as “the forerunner of all the Novels of the Modern Woman” (64), thus positioning Schreiner as the leading figure in a cluster of writers including Mona Caird, Sarah Grand, and Ella Hepworth Dixon—that is, the authors of what literary criticism has since classified as New Woman fiction.<sup>202</sup> Subsequent literary critics, however, have been less optimistic in their assessment of the writings of Schreiner and her New Woman contemporaries. Second-wave feminists, in particular, have been dissatisfied with the frequent representations of self-annihilation in New Woman fiction.<sup>203</sup> Citing Elaine Showalter's disparaging

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<sup>202</sup> Schreiner's own movement within various feminist circles both before and after this novel's publication was extensive. As Berkman notes, in the mid-1880s she was involved in various socialist and feminist circles in Britain, from Pearson's Men's and Women's Club to Hyndman's Democratic Federation, which called for universal suffrage (59). Following her return to Cape Town in 1889, she was “hailed as the genius of the suffrage movement in South Africa,” as First and Scott observe: in 1907, Schreiner became vice president of the Women's Enfranchisement League, which put together a collection of her writings entitled *Thoughts about Women*, including some excerpts from *The Story of an African Farm* (261).

<sup>203</sup> See Lyn Pykett's useful overview of literary scholarship on New Woman fiction from the pioneering work of Elaine Showalter, Gail Cunningham, and Patricia Stubbs in the 1970s to the emergence of new studies in the twenty-first century. Pykett observes that recent decades have seen increased attention to the intersection of late-Victorian women's writing and other social issues from socialism to eugenics to imperialism to urbanism (17-18). Recent work by historians has further drawn attention to the complex intersections between late-nineteenth-century feminist writings and religion, secularization, and new religious movements, including Joy Dixon's *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (2001) and Schwartz's *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion, and Women's Emancipation, 1830-1914* (2012).

remarks about Schreiner's "perverse will to fail," John Kucich notes that readers have long disliked this novelist's "uncompromising destruction of her own heroines" (88). In *The Story of an African Farm*, this issue emerges in the fate of Lyndall, who is secretly pregnant when she returns to the farm after her education abroad at the beginning of Part II. Lyndall later leaves the farm with the unnamed father of her child, who subsequently abandons her. Her baby, born out of wedlock, dies only two hours after birth, and Lyndall herself perishes some weeks afterwards. Lyndall's fate in *The Story of an African Farm* is disquieting, yet feminist criticism that depends on self-actualization misses both the ironies and the potentialities of Schreiner's inventive recourse to biblical texts.

The chapter entitled "Lyndall," the fourth in the novel's second part, makes innovative use of Ecclesiastes to express frustration with patriarchal systems. In this chapter, Lyndall returns to the farm after four years of education abroad, during which she has grown substantially in maturity and in worldly wisdom. Three times, she uses the expression "under the sun," a refrain that punctuates the Authorized Version's translation of Ecclesiastes, to convey a sense of utter disillusionment. Expressing her disdain for the "finishing schools" that were the extent of her education, she tells her friend Waldo, "of all the cursed places under the sun, where the hungriest soul can hardly pick up a few grains of knowledge, a girl's boarding school is the worst" (151). Her primary complaint is that these schools restrict women by teaching them only what will make them more appealing to men, an objection that she once again voices in the language of Ecclesiastes: "Look at this little chin of mine, Waldo, with the dimple in it. It is but a small part of my person; but though I had a knowledge of all things under the sun . . . it would not stead me through life like this little chin" (155). These statements underscore the paucity of all

that occurs “under the sun,” but Lyndall goes on to use the same phrase to insinuate that this scene, desolate though it may be, is nonetheless worth inhabiting. Critiquing Waldo for his habit of escaping into daydreams, Lyndall contrasts his idealism with her realism. Despite all her objections to patriarchal society, she insists, “I like to see real men. Let them be as disagreeable as they please, they are more interesting to me than flowers, or trees, or stars, or any other thing under the sun” (164). Here, Lyndall’s use of the “under the sun” refrain serves less to highlight vanity than to suggest a kind of acceptance akin to Qohelet’s resolution that “a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” (Ecclesiastes 8:15). Lyndall’s recognition of the inescapable futility of patriarchal society, then, does not utterly diminish her zest for life. Moreover, by expressing this paradoxical position through the language of Ecclesiastes, she indicates that the patriarchal elements of this biblical book might be both deconstructed and reconstructed for feminist purposes.<sup>204</sup>

Schreiner’s use of Ecclesiastes to turn a critical eye to patriarchal systems can further be situated in relation to a broader cultural trend of nineteenth-century rewritings of biblical texts that re-examine Christianity’s central figure of Jesus. Schreiner’s novelistic representations of victimized women and maternal self-sacrifice pose a significant critical dilemma, as Ann Heilmann explains: feminist literary scholars frequently debate “the question of how much feminists like Schreiner remained caught in the trope of female self-immolation when they used religious symbolism as a political

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<sup>204</sup> The patriarchal context and potential misogynistic leanings of Ecclesiastes become most event in chapter 7, in Qohelet’s portrait of woman as seductress: “ I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart *is* snares and nets, *and* her hands *as* bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her” (7:26). He further concludes that, while one might find a single righteous man from among a thousand, a righteous woman cannot be found anywhere (7:27-28).

strategy to unlock the spiritual and physical energies of women” (126). As Heilmann’s remarks indicate, this trope participates in a broader cultural formation that figures woman as the self-sacrificing Christ, one that precedes the Victorian era but that many critics identify as having particular purchase within this period. Julie Melnyk, for instance, argues that though this cultural formation allowed women “to claim spiritual and moral authority as representatives of a new order,” it nevertheless foreclosed on “any attempt to turn spiritual authority into secular power” because of the “indissoluble connection between Christ’s power and his suffering” (122), an argument briefly considered in my first chapter. There, I argued that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s expanded understanding of *kenosis* reframes this suffering not as victimization but as a gesture of love, one that encompasses both the becoming human of God the Son and the very act of creation by God the Father. In my third chapter, I showed that George Eliot’s departure from this Christological framework coexisted with a symbolic reclamation of the suffering servant: her imperfect incarnations of this type in *Romola* offer what I called “stumbling guidance” toward an expanded understanding of the kingdom of God on earth. *The Story of an African Farm*, in turn, adapts this theology of immanence in still more provocative ways. Schreiner starkly rejects Jesus’ divinity, but her novel’s failed Christ figures nevertheless point the way to a more promising relational model.

The clearest reference to a Christological framework in *The Story of an African Farm* appears in the full name of the Englishman who becomes the farm’s overseer in Part II: Gregory Nazianzen Rose. This allusion to St. Gregory Nazianzen, the patristic theologian who defended the doctrine of the Trinity in the face of Arianism, may have been informed by John Henry Newman’s writings about the saint, as critics including

Monsman (79) and Matthew Fike (94) have speculated. Fike proposes that Schreiner's character likely owes to Newman's portrait of Nazianzen's "affection, gentleness, kindness, tenderness, warmth, and basic good nature, despite occasional irritability and imperfect control over his passions" (94)—in other words, all the characteristics that the Victorians parsed as "feminine." Just as Newman portrays this saint as androgynous or even effeminate, so also Schreiner's Gregory combines masculine and feminine characteristics. Initially attracted to Lyndall's cousin Em, Gregory falls in love with Lyndall and pursues her after she leaves the farm with the father of her unborn child. When he finds her on her deathbed, he serves as her nurse, shaving his face and donning women's clothing to do so. These actions prompt Berkman to identify Gregory Rose as a prototype for "one of the most original and subversive features of [Schreiner's] social thought"—the "New Man" type exemplified more fully in her later fictional works (142).<sup>205</sup> Fike cautions that Gregory Rose is "a deeply ambiguous version of the New Man" who lacks the "New Manly qualities like gentleness and intelligence" that are present to a greater degree in Waldo (96); even so, Schreiner's challenge to accepted gender stereotypes is inescapable. However parodic her allusion to a Trinitarian poet and theologian, this allusion nonetheless suggests her longing for a mystical, non-hierarchal model of human relationships.<sup>206</sup> Such, indeed, is the model that emerges in one of the most radical statements in Lyndall's entire feminist polemic.

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<sup>205</sup> Berkman traces the evolution of Schreiner's "New Man" figure and her ideas about gender in *Women and Labour* (1911) and *From Man to Man*, an unfinished novel posthumously published in 1926 (142-45).

<sup>206</sup> The tripartite patterning of Schreiner's novel is notable in the context of her allusions to Trinitarian theology. Even though most of *The Story of an African Farm* focuses on Lyndall and Waldo, it begins with three children: Lyndall, Waldo, and Em. Furthermore, Schreiner sets up a romantic triangle among Lyndall, Gregory, and Em, whom Gregory ultimately marries according to Lyndall's dying wish.

The final words of Lyndall's speech undo tidy oppositions between patriarchal oppressors and those who fight for women's liberty, gathering all that exists "under the sun" into a heterogenous yet intricate whole. She reflects,

sometimes it amuses me intensely to trace out the resemblance between one man and another: to see how Tant' Sannie and I, you and Bonaparte, St. Simon on his pillar, and the emperor dining off larks' tongues, are one and the same compound, merely mixed in different proportions. What is microscopic in one is largely developed in another; what is a rudimentary in one man is an active organ in another; but all things are in all men, and one soul is the model of all. We shall find nothing new in human nature after we have once carefully dissected and analyzed the one being we ever shall truly know—ourselves. (164)

Even though Lyndall's admission of affinity with Tant' Sannie and Bonaparte, characters whom the novel portrays as reprehensible, carries a layer of self-critique, her neologism "ourselves" fuses plural and singular in mystical ways. This speech echoes the language used throughout the "Times and Seasons" chapter, which closes with a meditation on the interconnectivity of all living things. At the close of this chapter, the narrator surveys a diverse catalogue, ranging from the intestines of a drowned gander to the silhouette of a tree to the features of an insect, and marvels, "are they not all the fine branches of one trunk, whose sap flows through us all?" (118). The narrator's vision of the natural world incorporates a post-Darwinian recognition of nature's brutal indifference, as well as a Transcendentalist appreciation for non-human life.

The elements of Transcendentalist philosophy in *The Story of an African Farm* not only suggest Schreiner's intellectual debt to Emerson but also reflect her pluralistic integration of various spiritual traditions.<sup>207</sup> She regarded Buddha as a great religious

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<sup>207</sup> Berkman's study of Schreiner's life and writings usefully highlights continuities between Schreiner's thought and that of medieval mystical writers including Julian of Norwich (67). A new edition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* was published in England in 1843, bringing these mystical writings to Victorian audiences, as Gail Turley Houston observes (5). Various strands of mystical and feminist thought gained renewed purchase in the late nineteenth century, following the rise of Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical

teacher, expressing in her letter to Lloyd her preference for Buddha over Jesus because of his clear recognition of “the divinity in plant and animal, as well as man” (29 October 1892, ll. 116-17). As Berkman notes, Schreiner most likely acquired her knowledge of Buddhism during her time in England in the 1880s, where Buddhism was held in high regard by freethinkers like Pearson because of its “lack of dogma,” and its “dismissal of definitive supernatural knowledge” (64). This late-nineteenth-century turn to other religions helped to displace Christianity from its privileged cultural position in Britain, though the hierarchical structure and Orientalist assumptions underlying Victorian discourses of comparative religion can hardly be ignored. In the particular case of *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner’s complicity in British imperialism is apparent from the novel’s very title. While her revisions to religious discourse cannot overcome this implication in British imperialism, Schreiner’s heterodox engagement with biblical wisdom literature calls into question some of this imperialism’s underlying assumptions, including its appropriation of a biblical prophetic mode to justify this project.

### **Imperial Complicity and Imperial Critique: Beyond the “Chosen People”**

Literary critics have long recognized that analyzing Schreiner’s relationship to imperialism is not an easy task. Schreiner’s own feminist activity had a distinctly anti-imperial energy: she resigned her seat as vice-president of the Women’s Enfranchisement League to protest the League’s exclusion of black women from membership in 1909, as

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Society. The Theosophical Society gained an international following its inception in 1875 and sought to unify the esoteric, mystical wisdom of a range of religious traditions. See Heilmann’s examination of potential connections between Schreiner’s pantheistic mysticism and Blavatsky’s theosophical cosmology (122). Emerson’s thought was itself significantly influenced by the turn to Buddhism and Hinduism by nineteenth-century scholars of comparative religion. See Simon Lewis’s notes about Emerson’s knowledge of Eastern mysticism and the influence of these ideas on Schreiner (2-3). See also J. Jeffrey Franklin’s discussion of “the Victorian Jesus versus Buddha debate” that emerged in response to nineteenth-century studies of comparative religion (“The Influences” 814-17).

Heilmann remarks (5). Nevertheless, Heilmann observes that “fissures in Schreiner’s ideological framework” become apparent when one considers “the dissonance between her committed anti-imperialist politics and her discursive practice which drew on the racist register common to her time” (133). Anne McClintock effectively summarizes the paradoxes that animate this “discursive practice” as follows: “at odds with her imperial world, she was at times the most colonial of writers. Startlingly advanced in her anti-racism and political analysis, she could fall on occasion into the most familiar racial stereotypes” (259). Given the tensions and ironies that permeate *The Story of an African Farm*, perhaps it comes as no surprise that Schreiner’s position in relation to British imperialism remains difficult to fix.

At its worst, *The Story of an African Farm* might be criticized, as Bart Moore-Gilbert recognizes, for much the same reasons that Chinua Achebe famously objected to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899)—namely, that the story reduces Africa to nothing more than a prop “for the break-up of one petty European mind” (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 90). As Robin Hackett notes, “Schreiner defined her European New Women and Men against a backdrop of southern African people whom she thought of as old—including in her terms, the ‘races’ Bushmen, Hottentot, Bantu, and Boer” (42). Hackett draws attention to Schreiner’s reductive and stereotypical portrayals of South African Indigenous peoples, who appear in *The Story of an African Farm* only in minor roles and are represented in the derogatory terms commonly adopted by Europeans of that time. Schreiner’s words “Bushman,” “Kaffir,” and “Hottentot” are, as Jade Munslow Ong notes, “racialized terms” applied to the Santu, Bantu, and KhoiKhoi people, respectively (81). This racist lexicon becomes further complicated by Schreiner’s reference to an

African man as a “son of Ham,” a term that, as Moore-Gilbert observes, “appears to endorse the habit of finding biblical authority for the subjugation of the indigenous population” (90).<sup>208</sup> Even so, Moore-Gilbert suggests that Schreiner’s novel advances “signs of disquiet” about the oppression of South Africa’s Indigenous population (93), and Ong likewise contends that Schreiner’s recourse to racialized terms merits closer analysis. She claims that there are places where Schreiner “tries to expose and critique racial discrimination by working out her ideas through, rather than in spite of, her racist lexical choices,” emphasizing that it is the villainous Bonaparte who uses the most dehumanizing terms (80). For his part, Moore-Gilbert proposes that the character Waldo “seems symbolically to occupy the subject-position of the colonized peoples of South Africa” (93). Building on these points, I argue that some of Schreiner’s most emphatic critiques of imperialism issue from her responses to biblical higher criticism.<sup>209</sup>

The higher criticism’s Eurocentric biases can hardly be ignored; however, this criticism’s historical approach situated biblical texts within a wider framework of Hellenistic and Near Eastern traditions that, in turn, opened opportunities to redefine the terms of religious discourse. Charles LaPorte effectively outlines the double-edged qualities of Victorian reinterpretations of biblical texts in response to the higher criticism as follows: “any biblical retelling must be understood in the broader context of Western nineteenth-century Orientalism, yet it also represents an especially important refiguring

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<sup>208</sup> This pejorative term finds its roots in the curse issued on Noah’s son in Genesis 9:22-27.

<sup>209</sup> While a discussion of Schreiner’s other works exceeds the scope of the present chapter, her later novella *Trooper Peter Halckett of Mashonaland* (1897) is worth noting in this context. Written in protest of Cecil Rhodes’s British South African company, this novella critiques the imperial project by articulating a radical version of the value system advanced in biblical texts such as the Sermon on the Mount. See Laura Chrisman’s discussion of *Trooper Peter Halckett* in the context of Victorian criticism of empire (122-24).

of the terms of English moral and religious thought” (*Victorian Poets* 213). To unfold these twofold qualities in *The Story of an African Farm*, I situate Schreiner within what Simon Lewis calls the “heterodox theism” by which various intellectuals in South African resisted “British imperialism’s apparent intellectual hegemony” (2). Importantly, the religious context out of which Schreiner wrote *The Story of an African Farm* was far more diverse than the Methodism of her parents. As Lewis emphasizes, this region witnessed many challenges to “the Church’s orthodoxies” throughout the 1860s: from the work of “liberally minded Afrikaner ministers” in Unitarian congregations to freethinking responses to Eastern mysticism to the controversies resulting from works such as *Essays and Reviews* (12). Lewis further identifies the scholarship produced by Anglican Bishop J. W. Colenso, who served as a missionary to South Africa, as the region’s “most famous colonial counter-flow, theologically speaking” (12).

Indeed, Colenso’s assessment of the historical inaccuracies of biblical accounts in his highly controversial commentary *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (1862) was informed by his interactions with the Indigenous peoples who helped him translate the Bible into Zulu. Colenso, who was convicted of heresy but acquitted on appeal, used a mathematical method to show the inconsistencies and impossibilities of Pentateuchal accounts, as discussed in my fourth chapter. Furthermore, his earlier commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (published in 1861 and informed by his missionary experiences in South Africa) advocated for a universalism akin to that held by thinkers F. D. Maurice and George MacDonald, both of whom were dismissed from their respective positions in church leadership for this belief in the early 1850s. Colenso’s universalist leanings become evident in his commentary on passages such as

Romans 8:22 (“the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now”). Colenso concludes, “I cannot shut my eyes to the truth, which these words appear so clearly to imply, that there is hope in the counsels of Infinite Wisdom and Love, for *all*, for all ‘the creature,’ for the whole human race” (166). However mild this suggestion of universal salvation, it went against the grain of Victorian Christian institutions.

Schreiner’s letters suggest that she held to a still more provocative version of universalism, one that derived, in part, from her readings of higher critical scholars. Playfully, she remarked that Benjamin Jowett’s translation of Plato’s *Dialogues* surely means that “God will have to give Jowett a front seat in the kingdom of heaven” (to Isaline Philpot, August 1887, ll. 4-5). Schreiner’s terms of affirmation for Jowett’s classical scholarship validate Jowett’s claim in his contribution to *Essays and Reviews* that the Bible should be read “*like any other book*” (504). By implication, then, Christianity contains no special revelatory status that sets it apart from other religions; Schreiner’s tongue-in-cheek reference to “the kingdom of heaven” is clearly not an exclusive realm. Moreover, her descriptions in *The Story of an African Farm* of the entirety of nature as “the fine branches of one trunk, whose sap flows through us all” (118), as well as Lyndall’s affirmation of “one soul” (164), suggest a broadly pantheistic philosophy that accords with a range of religious traditions, in keeping with Schreiner’s remarks in her letters about her admiration for Buddha’s teachings.

Without advancing an explicit or clearly defined religious pluralism, throughout *The Story of an African Farm* Schreiner concentrates her satire of Christian institutions on exclusivist doctrines. In addition to her caricature of Evangelical sermons on the doctrine of hell, which will be examined in my chapter’s next section, she questions the

ideology of nationalist supremacism that many British imperialists advanced by appropriating biblical descriptions of the mission granted to Israel.<sup>210</sup> Tellingly, her account of the soul's spiritual development in the "Times and Seasons" portion of the novel depicts a young Christian believer who reads "a chapter in the prophets" only to be beset by the devil's question, "is it right that there should be a chosen people?" (106). Schreiner's hypothetical young believer is confused and dismayed: "How can we answer him? We were feeling so good till he came" (106). By voicing her resistance to the idea of a "chosen people" (along with the nationalistic, supremacist framework that it implies) through the figure of the devil, Schreiner appears to speak in a subversive mode akin to that which she adopted in the letter to Ellis quoted at the beginning this chapter, where she describes herself as "always quoting the bible sometimes for the devil's own purposes" (3 November 1888, ll. 34-35). Even so, her attention to the ideological tensions contained within biblical texts might rather be seen as a useful corrective that works less in the spirit of the devil than that of Qohelet.

The wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes has a cross-cultural energy that was brought into sharp relief as a result of the higher criticism's historicizing emphases. Along with his remarks about the book's post-exilic context, Cheyne calls attention to the fact that Qohelet "mentions God twenty-seven times, but under the name Elohim, which belonged to Him as the Creator, not under that of Yahweh, which an Israelite was privileged to use" (201). This observation about the significance of divine names extends and develops the principles of late-eighteenth-century source critics, such as Jean Astruc and

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<sup>210</sup> Eric M. Reisenauer draws attention to the "quite popular" move of mobilizing ideas about Jerusalem and Israel in British imperialist discourse, citing work by the poets Rudyard Kipling and Martin F. Tupper, as well as sermons by the Anglican Reverends Edward Hoare and Edward Budge (244-45).

Alexander Geddes, who differentiated between the first and second creation accounts (Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-3:24) partly on the basis of the Yahweh / Elohim distinction, as discussed in my first chapter. Throughout Cheyne's commentary on *The Wisdom Books* (1889), he highlights the absences of references to Israel throughout the Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes alike (96, 119, 201). Twentieth- and twenty-first-century biblical scholars have similarly highlighted these qualities as one of the distinguishing features of biblical wisdom literature. Alter, for example, highlights the "universalist" impulses of the biblical wisdom tradition (*The Wisdom Books* xiv), and Leo G. Perdue contrasts the salvific history that characterizes biblical prophetic literature with the creation theology of the wisdom books (*Wisdom and Creation* 20-21). These distinctions between prophetic and wisdom literatures help to illuminate the extent to which Schreiner both participates in and departs from the broader cultural formation of Victorian sage writing. Her parody of apocalyptic sermons challenges key aspects of the prophetic paradigm that George P. Landow's influential *Elegant Jeremiahs* (1986) identified as characteristic of the sage's authorial positioning. Destabilizing the prophetic stance, Schreiner advances a dialogism that foregrounds both writerly and readerly limitations.

### **Challenging False Prophets: Subversive Parody and Transformative Dialogue**

In many ways, Schreiner's revision of biblical texts to express her prescient feminism and her impassioned concern for social justice aligns with the prophetic stance adopted and adapted by Victorian writers such as Carlyle. Indeed, from Stead's 1894 review that hailed Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* as "the forerunner of all the Novels of the Modern Woman" (64) to the South African writer's Uys Krige's 1986 essay memorializing Schreiner as a gifted "seer" (9), many critical assessments

portray Schreiner as a prophetic figure. Even so, Schreiner expresses reservations with the prophetic mode of enunciation in her preface to the second edition of *The Story of an African Farm*. Distinguishing her novelistic method from what she calls “the stage method,” where human action unfolds according to an “immutable certainty” (xxxix), Schreiner emphasizes that, in her writings, “nothing can be prophesied”: individuals simply “appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away” (xxxix). Far from prophetic foreknowledge, this description of human experience as unpredictable and ineffable approximates Qoheleth’s reflection in Ecclesiastes, “*One generation passeth away and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever*” (1:4).

Schreiner further modulates her authorial positioning by signing this preface “R. Iron,” thus preserving the pseudonym “Ralph Iron,” under which the novel first appeared, even though her authorship of *African Farm* had become known throughout London by the time of her second edition (First and Scott 119). Her tribute to Emerson indicates that she was indirectly influenced by Carlyle’s thought, particularly as expressed in *Sartor Resartus*, for which Emerson wrote an enthusiastic preface to the American edition released in 1836. At the same time, *The Story of an African Farm* debunks the hierarchical model of authority advanced elsewhere in Carlyle’s writings, as in his lecture series *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841). Schreiner’s challenge to this paradigm becomes especially evident in her scathing portrait of the con artist Bonaparte Blenkins. The man’s surname offers a Dickensian corruption of the words *blink* and *blench*, as Monsman suggests (61); moreover, his first name associates him with Napoleon Bonaparte, celebrated along with Oliver Cromwell in Carlyle’s sixth lecture, “The Hero as King.” Indeed, Bonaparte’s arrival in the novel’s first part occurs

only after the young schoolgirl Lyndall identifies Napoleon Bonaparte as “the greatest man who ever lived,” correcting her cousin Em’s ignorance (13). Lyndall’s ideals are challenged when the con artist Bonaparte appears and ludicrously claims kinship with this historical conqueror.

Following his arrival at the farm, Bonaparte quickly manages not only to obtain food and shelter but also to secure a position as tutor to Lyndall and Em. His tall tales dupe the overseer Otto and charm Tant’ Sannie, allowing him to usurp Otto’s position and abuse Waldo, the overseer’s son, before he is finally driven away after making amorous advances on Tant’ Sannie’s fifteen-year-old niece. Schreiner offers a particular sharp satire of his deceptive and manipulative tactics in the apocalyptic sermon that Bonaparte delivers one Sunday morning, after he has taken the role of preacher from Otto. This sermon offers what Ofek aptly summarizes as an “unashamedly exploitative use of the Bible” that responds to “new hermeneutic challenges” with “dogmatic, predetermined responses” (168). Bonaparte’s preaching elides the unruly plurality of Christianity’s sacred stories as he plays fast and loose with biblical texts.

Bonaparte’s sermon opens with a brief reading of Revelation 21:8, “all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.” In his exegesis of this text, however, Bonaparte refers less to scripture than to anecdotes from his own life. He tells the story of a godless, hot-blooded Italian man whose desire for his lover ultimately caused him to throw himself into the flames of Mount Etna—a real-world example of a lake of fire and brimstone (37). What begins as a sermon on the evils of lying, then, culminates in the moral, “let us not love too much” (38). Bonaparte exclaims, “Was Jeremiah ever in love, or Ezekiel, or Hosea, or even any

of the minor prophets? No!” (38). This reading, of course, ironically obscures Hosea’s entire prophetic mission, enacted as it was through his marriage to and care for the prostitute Gomer. The discrepancy between Bonaparte’s sermon and his own behaviour—his con artistry thrives on both lying and licentiousness—renders his message all the more ludicrous. At the end of the sermon, the narrator’s remark that “the Bible closed with a tremendous thud” metonymically evokes Bonaparte’s clumsy appropriation of prophetic authority and his ham-handed attempts to contort and contain his biblical source texts (39).

This satirical portrait appears as the second episode in Schreiner’s chapter “Sunday Services,” subtitled *Service No. II*. By contrast, the preceding *Service No. I* depicts Waldo’s private attempts to wrestle with difficult questions regarding the differences among the accounts of Jesus’ life in the Synoptic Gospels—the very questions raised by biblical higher critics. Schreiner describes Waldo as plagued with “adder-like thoughts,” as he asks himself, “*Why did the women in Mark see only one angel and the women in Luke two? Could a story be told in opposite ways and both ways be true?*” (33). Waldo yearns for a capacious understanding of truth that is far removed from Bonaparte’s reductive and censorious approach to biblical texts.

While Bonaparte’s authoritarian sermon serves as a foil to Waldo’s more mystical spirituality, Schreiner does not collapse this antithesis into a neat dichotomy. Instead, her novel presents us with yet another biblical exegete: Otto, the farm’s overseer and Waldo’s father. On first glance, Otto seems to embody a literalist commitment to the very words of scripture, a commitment that Schreiner ridicules. At the close of the day on which he first welcomes Bonaparte into his home, Otto opens his “much-worn Bible” to

Matthew 25:35: “I was a stranger, and ye took me in” (23). Reading the day’s events in the light of this text, Otto gazes upon Bonaparte and sees neither his “bloated body” nor his “evil face” but senses only “that Christ was very near him” (23). It is, of course, Otto, who, in quite another sense of the word, gets *taken in* by the con artist. Nevertheless, Schreiner’s portrait of Otto tempers satire with sympathy. Once Bonaparte finally robs him of his position at the farm, Otto writes a farewell letter to Waldo, Lyndall, and Em that exhorts the three children, “serve the Saviour; give your hearts to him while you are yet young. Life is short” (60). This sentiment bears an uncanny resemblance to Qohelet’s statements in the closing chapter of Ecclesiastes, “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,” before “the silver cord be loosed” and “the dust return to the earth as it was” (Ecclesiastes 12:1, 6-7). Otto, as Rachel Hollander remarks, functions in Schreiner’s novel as a “disruptive presence,” one whose words and actions are difficult to resolve (139). Otto’s unsettling effects become all the more evident in light of the triad created with Bonaparte and Waldo: Otto constitutes the unstable third term in Schreiner’s group of Bible readers.

As this triad demonstrates, Schreiner’s biblical rewritings extend beyond a reductive inversion of Christianity’s sacred stories and toward a dialogic transformation of religious discourse. Later in the novel, Schreiner advances a provocative counterpoint to Bonaparte’s sermon on lies: her embedded parable, “The Hunter,” which depicts a quest for Truth. Crucially, this parable appears in the novel as the interpretation of a carving that Waldo has made *in memoriam* Otto, who dies the night after his unjust dismissal. Waldo’s honorific gesture lends further credence to the idea that the primary target in Schreiner’s Menippean satire is not Christianity *per se* but narrow ideas of

religious dogma. Such work puts Schreiner in the company of many of the higher critics: for instance, in his *Vie de Jésus*, Renan emphasizes that Jesus' teaching "was so little dogmatic" that "men did not become his disciples by believing this thing or that thing, but in being attached to his person and loving him" (382).<sup>211</sup> Renan calls attention to Jesus' method of teaching in parables, literary forms that he describes as "not fixed dogmas but images susceptible of infinite interpretations" (384). Schreiner's adaptation of this narrative form in "The Hunter," as well as in the theory of interpretation advanced following this parable, accords with Renan's remarks about the Gospel parables. Like Eliot, as discussed in chapter 3, Schreiner uses the parable to create an invitational, provocative mode of didacticism.

### **The Art of Interpretation: Schreiner's Embedded Parable**

Placed immediately after the "Times and Seasons" interlude at the opening of the novel's second part, the parable "The Hunter" is told to Waldo by another travelling stranger, modelled after Schreiner's own encounter with Willie Bertram, the freethinking son of a South African Unitarian minister who introduced Schreiner to the works of both Emerson and Spencer.<sup>212</sup> Schreiner presents this parable as the stranger's attempt to interpret a crude, "grotesque" carving at which Waldo has laboured for many months to honour his deceased father (123). In this parable, a sorrowing hunter is instructed by a

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<sup>211</sup> All quotations from Renan's *Vie de Jésus* are taken from the translation by the Unitarian biblical scholar John Haynes Holmes, originally published in 1927 and reissued by Modern Library in 1955. Several different English translations of Renan's work appeared in the late nineteenth century, as noted later in this chapter; however, I am using Holmes's work because it is currently the most accessible scholarly translation. It is not clear from Schreiner's letters whether she read Renan in translation or in the original French.

<sup>212</sup> See Lewis's discussion of Schreiner's meeting with Bertram in relation to her exposure to these philosophies (4-8). For his part, Spencer reportedly requested that Schreiner's allegory "The Hunter" be read to him on his deathbed (Berkman 51).

figure named Wisdom to pursue the elusive bird of Truth. He does so with the recognition that, at most, he will obtain only a single feather; his hope is that subsequent seekers will weave this feather and other feathers into a net that will eventually be capable of catching Truth. The hunter spends many years facing temptations in the wilderness before he climbs a mountain, gasps out his final breaths, and dies as a single feather descends to him.

This parable evokes a range of Christian and classical traditions, including, as Monsman observes, John Milton's discussion of Plutarch's version of quest for Truth in terms of the Isis and Osiris myth in his polemic *Areopagitica* (1644), subtitled "A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing" (91).<sup>213</sup> Milton alludes not only to the biblical image of truth as a wellspring (as in Psalm 36:9, "with thee *is* the fountain of life: in thy light we shall see light") but also to the story of Isis' search for the broken body of Osiris after he was dismembered by Typhon and his followers (739-42). He then draws an analogy with the "wicked race of deceivers" who, following Christ's ascension to heaven, "took the Virgin Truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds": rather like Isis, he claims that "the sad friends of truth" have begun the work of recovering this body "limb by limb" (742). Highlighting the similarities between the hunter of Schreiner's parable and these "sad friends of truth," Monsman argues that Schreiner's references to *Areopagitica* gain momentum in light of the "book-burning scene" earlier in *The Story of an African Farm*, in which Bonaparte burns Waldo's copy of John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) because of

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<sup>213</sup> Schreiner encountered Milton's works from an early age, and her letters recall her act of reading these works out loud to her mother while her mother did household chores: she remarks in a letter to Adela Villiers Smith, "I got to love [Milton] even when I couldn't understand [it] all" (5 May 1908, ll. 12-15).

Bonaparte's anti-intellectualist conviction, "*Whenever you come into contact with any book, person, or opinion of which you absolutely comprehend nothing, declare that book, person, or opinion to be immoral*" (79). Monsman concludes that "Milton's tract against censorship serves as a classic precedent for the novel's resistance to all forms of premature closure" (91).

In addition to this resistance to closure, Schreiner's allusion to Milton's fragmentary—and potentially plural—concept of truth heightens the novel's challenge to Bonaparte's heavy-handed didacticism. *Areopagitica* not only emphasizes that the search for the scattered pieces of "Truth" remains ongoing but also suggests that truth may be inherently multiple: evoking Proteus, Milton remarks, "it is not impossible that she may have more shapes than one" (746). Milton further insists on the role of active questioning in searching after truth: "a man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believe things only because his pastor says so, or the Assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy" (739). While this insistence emerges in the Puritan context that later gave rise to the nineteenth-century forms of dissenting Evangelicalism that are satirized in *The Story of an African Farm*, this model of active, individual reading is a far cry from the top-down authority parodically embodied in Bonaparte. Indeed, for all the limits of his literalism, Otto's fervent private devotions (such as his reading of Matthew 25, discussed previously) place him in the company of such inquiring spirits.

Schreiner's manner of embedding "The Hunter" within the narrative frame of *The Story of an African Farm* foregrounds an even more expansive process of inward inquiry and interpersonal dialogue. This parable emerges as the result of a conversation between

Waldo and the unnamed stranger, a conversation that begins with the stranger's simple questions. As Hollander suggests, the very act of asking questions "establishes [the stranger's] attitude as one of openness" (139), a receptive disposition that becomes all the more evident after the story concludes. When Waldo asks the stranger how he could have understood the carving's meaning so well, the stranger responds that "all true art" creates "a little door that opens into an infinite hall where you may find what you please" (133). Truth, as the stranger defines it, is inherently multiple: it "has a thousand meanings and suggests a thousand more" (134). Moreover, when this man instructs Waldo to look, through experience, into what is "deeper than the fiat of any being, God or man" (136), he contests the model of religious revelation as a static divine pronouncement that is exemplified in Bonaparte's sermon. Rather than identify authorial intention as governing meaning, the stranger affirms that the act of "reading more into this or that work of genius than was ever written into it" is in fact "the highest compliment" (139). For Schreiner, as for MacDonald in "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893), interpretation is itself a flexible, transformative art that is grounded in the individual reader.

In this way, Schreiner's use of parable aligns also with Eliot's adaptation of this narrative mode in *Romola* to invite the reader's participation in the work of forming meaning, as I have suggested in chapter 3. Even though Schreiner emphatically distanced her writings from Eliot's novelistic method, writing to Ellis on 5 April 1889 that whereas Eliot's "great desire was to teach," her own desire was "to express [herself], for [herself] and to [herself] alone" (ll. 9-13), "The Hunter" belies this seeming solipsism, suggesting that Schreiner has more in common with Eliot than she acknowledged in this statement. In other letters, Schreiner elsewhere expressed clear appreciation for Eliot's work,

exclaiming upon her first reading of *Romola* in 1886, “I had no idea *Romola* was so grand. How George Eliot seems to live again in it, and one feels her grand old heart beating through it” (to Isaline Philpot, March 1886, ll. 45). This affirmation of Eliot’s capacious concept of sympathy implies that Schreiner’s primary objective in the letter to Ellis may be to distinguish her work not from Eliot *per se* but from a particular kind of heavy-handed moralism. As I have argued, Eliot herself sought to eschew such moralism, despite the misrepresentation of her novelistic voice in collections such as Alexander Main’s *The Wise and Witty Sayings of George Eliot* (1874).

“The Hunter” further counters the moralistic sermonizing exemplified in Bonaparte’s preaching through its experimentation with biblical typology. Insofar as her chief character dies with his search unrealized, Schreiner evokes the biblical tradition of the Pisgah Sight—that is, Moses’ glimpse of the Promised Land just before his death (Deuteronomy 34:1-4). Because Moses himself would never enter the Promised Land, this prospect is fraught with potential ironies and tensions; it represents at once reward and punishment, success and failure. This scene occupies a vital place in the Victorian typological imagination, as Landow has shown (*Victorian Types* 205). Surveying literary engagements with the Pisgah Sight from John Henry Newman’s sermon on “Moses the Type of Christ” (1832) to Tennyson’s rewriting of this scene at the close of *Idylls of the King* (1885), Landow distinguishes between “orthodox Pisgah sights” and “modern ones” on the basis of whether these scenes foreground the presence or absence of God (*Victorian Types* 220). Whereas Landow privileges differences in content, my analysis of Schreiner’s engagement with the Pisgah Sight focuses on interpretive method.

By recasting this scene after the pattern of the Gospel parables, Schreiner signals her departure from typology's teleological framework, as well as her reservations about the model of verbal inspiration that typology presupposes. As Landow explains, "Like the Evangelical emphasis upon the centrality of the scriptures, typology was based upon a non-canonical belief that God had dictated every word of the Bible" (*Victorian Types* 55)—the very belief that Jowett's principle of reading the Bible "*like any other book*" undercut (504).<sup>214</sup> Parables, as I have argued in chapter 3, embed a particular kind of revelatory model, one wherein the end resides with the reader's responses. From Renan's discussion of parables as "images susceptible of infinite interpretations" (384) to Ricoeur's theory of these metaphorical narratives extending towards "the infinity of interpretation" ("Biblical Interpretation" 99) to Schreiner's assertion that such a metaphorical narrative "has a thousand meanings, and suggests a thousand more" (134), many thinkers have emphasized that parables are not about predicting a pattern but about provoking a response. The didactic model encoded in "The Hunter," then, depends on a process of discovery. As Schreiner suggests, truth might be less something that one finds than something that one makes.

Schreiner's innovative method of engaging with the Pisgah sight, as well as her provocative suggestion that truth is something called into being, emerges most powerfully at the end of her parable. During his search for truth, the hunter wanders in a waste land where he faces temptations, evoking the travails of the Israelites in the wilderness; his final ascent up a mountain suggests Moses on Mt. Nebo. As the hunter

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<sup>214</sup> Hans Frei emphasizes that typology, though a form of figural interpretation, offered "a natural extension of literal interpretation," one that featured "literalism at the level of the whole biblical story and thus of the depiction of the whole of historical reality" (2).

gasps out his last breaths, Schreiner revises Moses' death scene. Blinded by "the mist of death," the hunter assures himself that others will benefit from his work of carving steps up the mountain. Just before he dies, he is met with an unexpected turn of events:

Then slowly from the white sky above, through the still air, came something falling, falling, falling. Softly it fluttered down, and dropped on to the breast of the dying man. He felt it with his hands. It was a feather. He died holding it. (133)

Through its sensuously tactile description of the feather's motion and the man's grasp, this passage portrays the epiphanic moment as an intimate gesture, one that recalls the biblical tradition of Moses as one who was known by God "face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10). Moreover, Schreiner's replacement of sight with touch shifts the emphasis of the scene from the distant prospect of the entire Promised Land to the immediate—and fragmentary—presence of truth.

The hunter's words immediately before this feather descends underscore the relational ethic that animates *The Story of an African Farm*. The hunter consoles himself, "Where I lie down worn out other men will stand, young and fresh. By the steps that I have cut they will climb; by the stairs that I have built they will mount" (133). Even though he recognizes that these men will never know of him and may even laugh at his "clumsy" work, he exults in that "they will mount, and on *my* work; they will climb, and by *my* stair! They will find her, and through me!" (133). As the hunter's emphatic possessive pronouns suggest, Schreiner's valorizing of self-sacrifice—for which she has often been challenged by feminist critics—eventuates in what is less an annihilated self than a repositioned self. In his very last words before Truth's feather falls and he himself expires, the hunter declares, "And no man liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself"

(133). The archaisms “liveth” and “dieth” create a biblical cadence, echoing Romans 14:7 (“For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself”). This statement appears in the context of the Pauline exhortation to religious community, despite differing customs regarding dietary restrictions and Sabbath observances among members. Even as *The Story of an African Farm* parodies the religious practices exemplified by Bonaparte—and, to a lesser extent, Otto—Schreiner’s novel similarly longs for an expansive understanding of community. Her embedded parable advances a distinctive ethical and intellectual trajectory: from isolation to incorporation, from authorial privilege to readerly participation.

Within the context of Schreiner’s larger narrative, this outward-looking ethic becomes tempered with a self-reflexive critique; ultimately, however, Schreiner’s work of probing the limits of such idealism eventuates in a delicate balance between pessimism and hopefulness. The quest depicted in “The Hunter” finds a parodic counterpart elsewhere in the novel: a few chapters earlier, Waldo finds another product of his craftsmanship suddenly and cruelly destroyed, and the narrative portrays such work as an exercise in futility. In this scene, Bonaparte heartlessly crushes the shearing machine that Waldo has spent many months in building. This incident prompts Waldo to liken his own efforts to the thwarted attempts of a dung beetle that he sees in passing:

The beetle was hard at work trying to roll home a great ball of dung it had been collecting all the morning; but Doss broke the ball, and ate the beetle’s hind legs, and then bit off its head. And it was all play, and no one could tell what it had lived and worked for. A striving, and a striving, and an ending in nothing. (74)

Unlike that of the hunter in the parable, the beetle’s quixotic quest appears meaningless and futile. This episode appears at the close of chapter 9 in Part I, and Schreiner returns

to these lines at the opening of Part II. Here, she embeds an epigram from earlier in this novel: “And it was all play, and no one could tell what it had lived and worked for. A striving, and a striving, and an ending in nothing” (101).<sup>215</sup> Juxtaposed as it is with the opening to the “Times and Seasons” chapter, this epigram intensifies the combinations of sublime ascent and grotesque descent that characterize Schreiner’s narrative. Much after the fashion of Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, with its account of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (“Born-of-God Devil’s-Dung”), Schreiner’s scatological imagery employs a kind of dark humour to highlight life’s absurdities. Even so, Schreiner, like Carlyle, uses an element of black comedy to expose human limitations and, what is more, to make this limitation into a kind of strength.<sup>216</sup> The final chapters of Schreiner’s novel, which feature the deaths of both Lyndall and Waldo, return to this combination of futility and possibility.

### **Solitude and Participation, Death and Regeneration in *The Story of an African Farm***

When the stranger finishes his conversation with Waldo, he shakes the boy’s hand, rides away, and casts a backward glance: “Poor little devil!” he exclaims, first “smiling” and then, “wearily, very wearily,” sighing (138). Given the stranger’s insightful interpretive commentary throughout the chapter, Schreiner invites the reader to see Waldo’s rather naively blissful reflection that “there was a rare beauty . . . in the sunshine that evening” as an instance of dramatic irony: there may be nothing glorious

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<sup>215</sup> Schreiner’s self-authored epigram might also be a veiled and parodic allusion to the resonant final lines of Alfred Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (1842), composed in the aftermath of the death of his beloved friend Arthur Henry Hallam: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (l. 70). Schreiner’s epigram undercuts the idea of heroism in the face of mortality that Tennyson’s dramatic monologue affirms.

<sup>216</sup> This use of humour aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “grotesque realism,” which he identifies as a characteristic element of the festive laughter of medieval carnival. According to Bakhtin, grotesque realism provides “a bodily and popular corrective to individual idealistic and spiritual pretense” because it lowers abstract ideals to the sphere of the earth and the functions of the material body (*Rabelais* 20-22).

here after all (138). However, Schreiner's narrative instability makes it challenging to determine whether the stranger's or Waldo's perceptions of the evening—or, by extension, their senses of the parable's meaning—are the more reliable. Christine Haskill offers a nuanced interpretation of this interlude in Schreiner's novel, identifying the embedded parable as expressing a concept of "valuable failure" that applies to the story's conclusion. As Haskill sees it, this parable advances "a metafictional moment providing an interpretive framework for the complexities of the text," one that allows for a reassessment of the deaths of both Lyndall and Waldo (87). This reading can be usefully amplified to account for Schreiner's representation of Lyndall, Waldo, and Gregory in the novel's closing chapters. The interactions among these characters advance Schreiner's expansive vision of community in challenging and compelling ways.

Lyndall's last living moments are at once tragic and promising, with their resonant repositioning of the religious discourse that runs throughout the novel. Although her earlier feminist polemic explicitly rejects Moses' vista on Mt Nebo—she declares, "it would be better not to see [the Promised Land] than to see it and not enter" (162)—her deathbed scene recalls this scene as adapted in the ending of "The Hunter."<sup>217</sup> When Gregory finds Lyndall dying in a hotel some distance away from the farm, she is weak and delirious. Even so, she speaks as a visionary who sees "a poor weak soul striving after good . . . [that] learnt, through tears and much pain, that holiness is an infinite compassion for others; that greatness is to take the common things of life and walk truly

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<sup>217</sup> Schreiner elsewhere evoked the Pisgah Sight in application to her own feminist work: she dedicates her volume *Dreams* (1890), a collection of parables that included a reprinting of "The Hunter" as follows: "To a small girl-child, who may live to grasp somewhat of that which for us is yet sight, not touch" (n. pag.).

among them” (249).<sup>218</sup> For Lyndall, whose speech ends elliptically, there is no exodus, no ultimate deliverance; nevertheless, the promise of something sacred animates common life. This reverence for “the common things of life” aligns with the reclamation of human suffering and sympathy advanced in Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*) and Eliot’s *Romola*, as discussed in chapter 3.

Bearing witness to Lyndall’s final words is her nurse, the cross-dressing Gregory. As Gregory turns from the scene of Lyndall’s death, the narrator compares him to the biblical Hagar, who bore the child Ishmael with Abraham in her capacity as Sarah’s handmaid before being forced to flee into the wilderness: “Like Hagar, when she laid her treasure down in the wilderness, he sat afar off: —‘For Hagar said, Let me not see the death of the child’” (251). This allusion to Hagar is one of two instances in the novel that reference the story of Genesis 21. Previously, Schreiner evoked Hagar’s plight in reference to the situation of a wandering “Kaffir woman” that Otto meets on the roadside, just before his own dismissal as overseer. Providing her with provisions and urging her to get to the next settlement, Otto pauses as he regards the woman “like Hagar . . . thrust out by her mistress in the wilderness to die” (54). Even though he fears that this “sullen, ill-looking woman, with lips hideously protruding” will try to rob his own farm, he gives her “his old brown salt-and-pepper coat” before heading home (54). Fraught with racist stereotypes though it is, this scene nevertheless highlights Otto’s commitment to enacting the radical ethics of the Gospels (cf. Matthew 5:40, “if any man will sue thee . . . and take

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<sup>218</sup> Schreiner’s diction calls to mind a range of biblical passages about righteousness, including Micah 6:8 (“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”) and 2 Corinthians 6:18 (“for ye are the temple of the living God; and as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them”).

away thy coat, let him have *thy* cloke also”). The allusions to Hagar are similarly problematic but provocative. In the biblical passage evoked, God assuages Hagar’s fears that her son will die of thirst by providing water and promising that he will “make [Ishmael] a great nation” (Genesis 21:18). Hagar has long been associated with Islam, as she is the mother of Abraham’s son who did not inherit the Jewish (and, later, Christian) tradition.<sup>219</sup> Accordingly, Schreiner’s references to Hagar in *The Story of an African Farm* thicken the novel’s challenge to religious exclusivism. Even though Lyndall (unlike Ishmael) perishes and even though Gregory (unlike Hagar) hears no divine voice, Schreiner combines sorrow with a hope that reaches beyond the “chosen people.” Her rewriting of Genesis 21, then, brings the outcast figures within her expansive spiritual community.

While Gregory, figured as Hagar, witnesses Lyndall’s spiritual epiphany, Waldo meets death in more prosaic company. He dies quietly in his sleep from some unexplained ailment, slipping away while sitting in the backyard, “his hat slouched down over his face” (268). Passing by, Em leaves him a glass of milk. As the backyard chickens perch on his motionless body, the narrator undercuts Em’s confident assertion that “he will wake soon . . . and be glad of it,” with the enigmatic line—the last line in the entire novel—“But the chickens were wiser” (270). On the one hand, this scene offers a bathetic counterpart to Schreiner’s embedded parable: in place of the feather from the

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<sup>219</sup> While a discussion of Schreiner’s knowledge of Judaism exceeds the scope of the present study, Berkman’s work usefully illuminates Schreiner’s appreciation for various Jewish thinkers. Berkman calls attention to Schreiner’s reading of Baruch Spinoza, Heinrich Heine, and Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) and speculates that Schreiner was attracted to Jewish thought because “none of the terrifying doctrines of original sin, damnation, predestination, and vicarious atonement contaminated Jewish theology and ethics” (62). Berkman further observes that Schreiner publicly denounced anti-Semitism in Cape Town in 1906 and that the rabbi, scholar, and Hasidic Jew Solomon Schechter regarded Schreiner as a religious mentor (196).

majestic bird of Truth, readers are left with the antics of the common barnyard chickens. On the other hand, that the birds perch on Waldo in the moment of his death suggests a creature kinship that is in keeping with Waldo's musings shortly before he dies, where he describes the chickens as "tiny sparks of brother life" (269). This levelling of human/nonhuman hierarchies in the face of mortality once again evokes the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, with its affirmation "all are of the dust, and to dust all return again" and its questioning of distinctions between "the spirit of man" and "the spirit of the beast" (3:20-21). Such creature kinship further recalls the ineffable fullness expressed at the end of the "Times and Seasons" chapter: "all is part of a whole, whose beginning and end we know not. The life that throbs in us is a pulsation from it; too mighty for our comprehension, not too small" (118). Schreiner's phrasing echoes Qohelet's claim that God "hath made every *thing* beautiful in its time: also he hath set the world in [the sons of men's] heart[s], so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). For all that Schreiner focuses on the futility and absurdity of human endeavours, *The Story of an African Farm* upholds the prospect of a meaningfulness that lies at the limits of what can be articulated.

The ending of this seemingly pessimistic novel, then, becomes ambiguously hopeful. In the face of death, Schreiner refuses to advance a doctrine of resurrection, or even a clearly defined concept of immortality; instead, her novel's contrasting statements and incidents eventuate in a broadly pantheistic mysticism, one that is artistic in its expression though limited in its explanatory power. Even when confronted with a direct inquiry about the nature of her religious beliefs, Schreiner found it challenging to accurately describe her own convictions, as her epistolary exchange with the Presbyterian

minister Lloyd in 1892 reveals. Responding to her interlocutor's appreciative yet searching questions, she reflected, "If you ask me what is my religion, it is hard for me to answer . . . but if I must put it into words I would say the Universe is one, & it lives: - or if you would put it into older phraseology, I would say; - there is nothing but God" (ll. 46-52). However tentatively, Schreiner affirmed that something akin to divinity animates and sustains everything that exists. The South African writer T. J. Haarhoff, who knew Schreiner personally, went so far as to compare Schreiner's sense that "there is nothing but God" with the reverence for immanent divinity that emerges in EBB's poetry: his retrospective discussion of Schreiner's writing directly quotes the lines from *Aurora Leigh* (1857), "*Earth's crammed with heaven / And every common bush afire with God*" (qtd. in Haarhoff 18).<sup>220</sup> The striking points of comparison between these two writers underscores the critical imperative to re-examine the "crisis of faith" narrative as it has been applied to Victorian intellectuals, as I have argued throughout this study. The common ground between Schreiner and EBB helps to suggest points for reconsidering the changing religious landscape in the nineteenth century on a broader scale.

Rather like EBB's rewriting of the biblical fall narrative in *A Drama of Exile*, then, *The Story an African Farm* leaves its paradoxes and contradictions provocatively unresolved. As Berkman observes, Schreiner's musings about an ineffable divinity "offer no persuasive theodicy, no effort to explain how the one, wondrous majesty of creation, at once transcendent and immanent, can simultaneously include the cruelty of human beings and nature" (69). The concepts of eternal judgement and punishment that figure so

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<sup>220</sup> Haarhoff's remarks appear in the context of an essay that begins anecdotally, citing his own memories of Schreiner. This essay appears in the collection *Until the Heart Changes: A Garland for Olive Schreiner* (1967), edited by Zelda Friedlander (17-18).

prominently in Bonaparte's apocalyptic sermon—and, indeed, in the prophetic pattern that Landow identifies as integral to Victorian sage discourse—are nowhere to be found in Schreiner's mystical thought.<sup>221</sup> Instead of proposing a solution to the problem of evil or an argument about the meaning of suffering, Schreiner's adaptations of wisdom literature demonstrate the potential strength of unanswered questions. Like the other writers discussed in my study, Schreiner turns to wisdom literature not to restrict or contain ideas about righteousness and truth but to catalyze a process of spiritual searching. Schreiner's readiness to subject even her own insights to a thoroughgoing critique distinguishes her as the most skeptical, but by no means the least reverent, of the Victorian wisdom writers that I have analyzed.

### **A Hidden Design: Revelation, Concealment, and Wisdom Literature**

Schreiner's unanswered questions in *The Story of an African Farm* find powerful expression in Gregory's musings the day after Lyndall dies, as the "Grey Dawn" approaches: "Had she found what she sought for? Had she ceased from being? Who shall tell us? There is a veil of terrible mist over the face of the Hereafter" (253). Even with the morning's arrival, Gregory's spiritual vision remains clouded. Schreiner's imagery of "a veil of terrible mist over the face of the Hereafter" emphasizes obscurity; in contrast to the Pauline expression about seeing "through a glass, darkly," her words suggest opacity, without hope of finally seeing "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Gregory's state of prolonged unknowing has more in common with the existential longing that Waldo

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<sup>221</sup> In the second chapter of *Elegant Jeremiahs* (1986), Landow outlines this apocalyptic framework and explains the prophet's role of delivering warnings to those who fail to heed his message and visions of blessing for those who repent (57-72). The absence of this concept of rewards and punishments in some of the biblical wisdom books receives discussion in Cheyne's 1889 commentary, which identifies dissatisfaction with doctrines of retribution as the "central point" of "heterodoxy" in Ecclesiastes as well as in Job (251).

expresses in an unfinished letter to Lyndall, composed without the knowledge of her death and abandoned once he hears the news. Waldo remarks that to be human is to be like the sea, “always wanting, wanting, wanting . . . it is always asking a question, and it never gets the answer” (227). His words evoke the resonant description in the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes, “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea *is* not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again” (1:7). These are the very lines that Cheyne cited in his commentary as a justification for his claim that the poetry of Ecclesiastes has “elemental force” and “appeals to the modern reader in some of his moods more than anything else in the Old Testament except the Book of Job” (246). Cheyne’s remarks identify something particularly “modern” or timely for the late Victorians in Qohelet’s expressions of futility and even skepticism, at the same time that his comments call attention to the artistic qualities of biblical wisdom texts. Fittingly, Schreiner’s creative adaptation of these biblical images underscores that the task of the wisdom writer resides less with arguing readers into a particular doctrinal position than with awakening a heightened sensitivity to experiences of questioning and even doubt.

Schreiner performs such perceptual work, for instance, through her play with the metaphor of the breath that underlies the refrain of Ecclesiastes, which the Authorized Version renders as “vanity of vanities” (1:2; 12:8). As Alter observes in his notes on the Hebrew text, this translation, along with most subsequent English versions, fails to convey the full connotations of the original metaphor: the word *hevel* implies “not only futility, absurdity, and vanity, but at least insubstantiality, ephemerality, and elusiveness.” He explains that *hevel*, “the flimsy vapour that is exhaled in breathing,” is the opposite of *ruah*—that is, “life-breath” or “the animating force in a living creature” (*The Wisdom*

*Books* 340). The twofold qualities of the breath metaphor express what is perhaps “the essential position” of Ecclesiastes—namely, that “all things are full of emptiness,” as Northrop Frye puts it (“Wisdom” 177). Within *The Story of an African Farm*, the imagery of breath becomes at once ephemeral and strangely life-giving. Schreiner’s dialectical energy, which she shares with Qohelet, means that this insubstantial vapour runs into a sustaining breath. This image of both mortality and vitality appears in the embedded parable, which features in the narrative as the stranger’s eloquent response to what the aspiring craftsman Waldo can say only “with broken breath” (123). As the parable unfolds, the stranger’s telling emphasizes that the hunter “needed all his breath for climbing,” even as “every breath . . . hurt him” (130-131). So, too, Schreiner invites her imperfect but aspiring readers to participate in something beyond themselves as they move from fullness to emptiness, and from to fullness.

In adapting such metaphors, Schreiner participates creatively in the work of many nineteenth-century higher critics, for whom the study of the Bible’s diverse historical contexts prompted a further reconsideration of its symbolical and artistic qualities. For instance, an unsigned translator’s preface to one of the first English translations of Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (dated 8 December 1863) positioned this scholarship as an attempt to productively reframe the biblical canon.<sup>222</sup> The translator remarked, “the great problem of the present age is to preserve the religious spirit, whilst getting rid of the superstitions

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<sup>222</sup> This translation appeared as *The Life of Jesus* and was published in London by Trübner and Company in 1864. I have not been able to identify the translator in question, though it is worth noting that various other translations of Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* appeared in the late nineteenth century, including one by Charles Edwin Wilbur (published in New York by G. W. Dillingham in 1891) and one by William G. Hutchinson (published in London by Walter Scott in 1897). In 1927, the Unitarian biblical scholar John Haynes Holmes published another translation of Renan’s work, which was published by Modern Library in New York and has since seen several reprintings; all of my own quotations from Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* are taken from Holmes’s translation, as explained in footnote 211.

and absurdities that deform it, and which are alike opposed to science and common sense,” identifying both Renan’s work and *Essays and Reviews* (1860) as recent examples of scholarship that attempts to address this problem (vii). Jowett’s “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” the final piece in *Essays and Reviews*, used similar terms in his call to respond to recent developments in biblical scholarship: Jowett urged his English readers, “as the time has come when it is no longer possible to ignore the results of criticism, it is of importance that Christianity should be seen to be in harmony with them” (502). Furthermore, Jowett claimed that this process of harmonizing biblical texts with recent scholarly findings is intended not to empty Christianity’s sacred scriptures of their power but to revitalize them in a manner congruent with the spirit of the gospel.

Protesting against the unthinking preservation of dogmatic claims about the Bible’s divine inspiration, Jowett declared “that in the present day the great object of Christianity should be, not to change the lives of men, but to prevent them from changing their opinions, that would be a singular inversion of the purposes for which Christ came into the world” (502). Much as Schreiner proclaimed Jesus to be “a freethinker” (to Betty Molteno, 23 May 1900, ll. 23-25), so Jowett emphasized the dynamic, provocative power of Jesus’ parables. As Jowett recognized, the biblical canon “embraces writings of very different kinds”; he later explained this generic plurality in ways that highlight the literary qualities of what later biblical scholars have classified as wisdom texts, including Job, Ecclesiastes, and the parables of Jesus (487; 505). He suggests that such texts require a particular manner of reading—they contain a “depth and inwardness of which require a measure of the same qualities in the interpreter himself” (505). In Jowett’s view, these qualities all too often go unrecognized by biblical exegetes:

But this inwardness of the words of Christ is what few are able to receive; it is easier to apply them superficially to things without, than to be a partaker of them from within. And false and miserable applications of them are often made, and the kingdom of God becomes the tool of the kingdoms of the world. (493)

Jowett's contrasts between external and internal modes of reading, as well as between "the kingdom of God" and "the kingdoms of the world," deliver a sobering rebuke, one that recalls Jesus' rebuking description of the Pharisees as "like unto whitened sepulchres," as they are outwardly beautiful and righteous but inwardly "full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Matthew 23:27-28). By Jowett's implication, the process of partaking in the words of Christ "from within"—that is, re-reading the parables in a spirit of thoughtful inquiry with a mind open to self-transformation—would help to correct the "false and miserable applications" of these words. Wisdom literature, then, might play a powerful role in revitalizing the biblical texts.

The idea that wisdom literature can enrich the critical and creative project of reconsidering biblical texts is an idea that found expression in the Victorian period, but it is by no means limited to Victorian thinkers. Cheyne's 1889 commentary on Ecclesiastes identified this wisdom book as carrying a particular resonance during the late nineteenth century, with its rising agnosticism and its growing disillusionment about progress. Referring to Qohelet's wisdom as "the fragments of truth which a much-tried pilgrim gathered up in his twilight wanderings," Cheyne declared, "Never so much as in our own time have this taste and this ear been so largely possessed" (242). Critical interest in this wisdom literature has not disappeared in the twenty-first century: for instance, in June of 2016, the interdisciplinary and open-access scholarly journal *Religions* published a special issue entitled "The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern

World.”<sup>223</sup> The featured essays provide various answers to this titular question; throughout my own study of Victorian adaptations of these ancient texts, I have proposed that wisdom literature has something especially significant to contribute to the debates about biblical revelation, inspiration, and authority sparked by the higher criticism and continuing to this day. More than any other biblical genre, wisdom literature presents the pursuit of meaning as an artistic process and emphasizes that, despite all attempts to trace it out, the universe’s design remains hidden. Much of wisdom literature, in Ricoeur’s words, emphasizes “the silence and absence of God” and thus “brings to light the overwhelming question of the sense or nonsense of existence” (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 86). This obscurity, however disquieting, has important theological implications, as Ricoeur explains: “to say that the God who reveals himself is a hidden God is to confess that revelation can never constitute a body of truths which an institution may boast of or take pride in possessing” (“Toward a Hermeneutic” 95). The contradictions and paradoxes of wisdom literature thus provide a powerful mode of challenging dogmatic and authoritarian claims about the biblical canon, including those advanced through narrowly literalist exegesis.

At once skeptical and imaginative, Schreiner’s biblical rewritings epitomize both the possibilities and the limitations of this wisdom literature. Her creative

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<sup>223</sup> This special issue was edited by Arthur J. Keefer and Katharine J. Dell. Among the thoughtful essays in this collection, Jennie Grillo’s discussion of Ecclesiastes in the dual context of Matthew Arnold’s and Charles Taylor’s concepts of modernity is perhaps the most closely related to my own study (“Qohelet and the Marks of Modernity: Reading Ecclesiastes with Matthew Arnold and Charles Taylor” [*Religions* 7 (2016) article 77]). Grillo argues that several of the traits that these writers associate with modernity, including self-conscious interiority, the constitution of the self through narrative, and the crisis of meaning, find compelling expression in Ecclesiastes (1-9). W. D. Shaw’s *Secrets of the Oracle: A History of Wisdom from Zeno to Yeats* (U of Toronto P, 2009) is another example of twenty-first-century literary scholarship that reconsiders the artistic qualities of wisdom traditions. As his title suggests, Shaw ranges across classical and biblical traditions.

reinterpretations in her experimental first novel anticipate the ideas about literary form and religious revelation that she later articulated in her letter to Lloyd:

Except in my own language of parables, I cannot express myself. If I say that in a stone in the road, in the thoughts in my brain, in the corpuscles in a drop of blood under my microscope, in a railway engine rushing past me in the velt, I see God, shall I not only be darkening counsel with words? (ll. 137-43)

At the same time that she advances a series of arresting metaphors for the experience of divine immanence, Schreiner self-reflexively acknowledges the poverty of her phrasing. Echoing the divine speeches of the Book of Job, which open with the rebuke “Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:1), she emphasizes that words function as much to obscure as to express meaning. A similar emphasis emerges in *The Story of an African Farm*: questioning the idea of divinely dictated truth, Schreiner provides a model of revelation and concealment as occurring together, through imperfect yet artistic human words. She suggests that her wisdom writing may have the capacity to illuminate yet implies that it does so only through a process of indirection—by evoking what cannot be stated directly but can be darkly adumbrated. In her process of forming wisdom, limitation and aspiration come together both to challenge dogmatic claims to certainty and to catalyze the further pursuit of meaning.

## Coda: Ruminations

“Of making many books *there is* no end; and much study *is* a weariness of the flesh,” concludes the writer of the Epilogue appended to the final chapter of Ecclesiastes (12:12). These last words reprise the book’s central motif of vanity, even as they add a new inflection: unlike Ecclesiastes 1:1-12:8, the final few verses are positioned less as the words of Qohelet himself than of one reflecting on his teachings. This change in voice underscores the composite qualities of Ecclesiastes, along with its work of gathering or assembling different perspectives, as emphasized in my last chapter. At first glance, the closing remark about the futility of books and study appears to offer an ironic undercutting of Qohelet’s teachings, a pessimistic recognition that the search for wisdom will inevitably be frustrated. Held up to further examination, however, this statement might rather be seen as an insightful cautionary note, a reminder that narrowly academic activities are limited in their capacity to pursue existential and experiential questions. Moreover, to affirm that wisdom exceeds the confines of scholarly inquiry need not be to deny the value of trying to write about it. On the contrary, the sheer inexhaustibility of this task might, paradoxically, generate its own creative energy.

Both the overt reservations and the latent hopefulness conveyed in Ecclesiastes 12:12 find a fascinating echo in the Victorian biblical scholar and Anglican cleric Thomas Kelly Cheyne’s 1889 commentary on “The Book of Koheleth.”<sup>224</sup> In effect, Cheyne’s remarks about recent biblical scholarship return to the issues raised at the end

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<sup>224</sup> This commentary appears as the final chapter in Cheyne’s *Job and Solomon: The Wisdom of the Old Testament*, discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.

of Ecclesiastes. He prefaces a literature review that ranges from Johann Gottfried Herder to Ernest Renan by warning vaguely (and wryly), “It is not every critic of Ecclesiastes who helps the reader to enjoy the book which is criticised. Too much criticism and too little taste have before now spoiled many excellent books of the Old Testament” (242). In this context, Cheyne’s caution against “too much criticism” is at once amusing and sobering. He attempts to distance his own work from the rigorously historical approaches of German and continental biblical scholars, even though his commentary is notably receptive to the higher criticism overall. Taken together, Qohelet and Cheyne indicate that the writer who *creates* wisdom literature and the writer who *critiques* wisdom literature should alike be wary of the wearisome project of “making many books.”

In addition to this warning, Cheyne’s remarks about the need to write with “taste” and his imperative “to enjoy the book” suggest, albeit obliquely, that there might be another approach to wisdom literature, one that runs counter to dominant scholarly practices. Cheyne is not alone in making this suggestion: twentieth- and twenty-first-century biblical scholars have often underscored that wisdom literature requires a personal and reflective mode of engagement. Ben Witherington, for one, draws attention to this point in the opening of his 1994 book on the biblical wisdom tradition and the sayings of Jesus. He emphasizes that because wisdom literature involves “metaphors, similes, figures, images, and riddles” rather than “straightforward propositions,” this literature requires “patience and time” to understand: “one is obligated not merely to read the Wisdom material but also to ruminate on it” (3).<sup>225</sup> As these statements highlight,

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<sup>225</sup> See also Roland E. Murphy’s approach to this biblical genre in the opening to his book *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (1990). In *Rereading Ecclesiastes: A Literary and Cultural Exegesis* (2003), Mary E. Mills identifies the postmodern return to imaginative (rather than historical)

wisdom literature not only invites but, what is more, demands an introspective and contemplative approach, by virtue of its unique qualities as a literary form. These formal qualities generate a dialectical paradigm of revelation-in-concealment and establish a mode of didacticism based less on answers than on questioning, as I have illustrated throughout my study.

My formalist analysis has focused on five Victorian adaptations of biblical wisdom literature's characteristic forms, from the dialogue to the aphorism to the parable to the hymn to personified Wisdom to the personal reflection. Making biblical wisdom literature my intertextual and conceptual basis, I have pursued the question of how Victorian writers transformed biblical texts in response to higher critical debates. This inquiry has worked across traditional generic categories, as I have proposed that Paul Ricoeur's category of poetics can be meaningfully applied to the dynamic metaphors and heuristic processes that distinguish wisdom literature both aesthetically and theologically. Furthermore, this approach has provided me with a framework for reassessing the influential and multi-generic paradigm of Victorian sage writing, which has understood Victorian literature's biblical writings primarily in terms of their typological assumptions, prophetic patterning, and rhetorical forcefulness. In so doing, I have focused on how each of my primary texts incorporates the distinctive formal features of biblical wisdom literature. What my analysis has not emphasized, but what merits brief attention here, is that all of these adaptations are embedded within other genres that intersect in various ways with wisdom literature's creative and contemplative forms.

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approaches to the Bible as finding expression in Walter Brueggemann's influential work, especially *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (1993).

Of all the texts that I have examined, perhaps the one that resonates the most fully with biblical wisdom literature's characteristic poetics of wonder is George MacDonald's fairy tale *Phantastes* (1858). By working with Romantic concepts of intuition and imagination, MacDonald draws a compelling distinction between a knowledge that is informed by logical analysis and objective argument, on the one hand, and a wisdom that depends on questioning, self-reflection, and personal application, on the other. His magical *bildungsroman* traces the artistic and spiritual maturation of the poet Anodos, at the same time that it initiates a disquieting process of readerly discovery that extends beyond the story's frame. Similarly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile* (1844) adapts the Romantic form of the closet drama to create multivocal lyric poetry that resists narrative closure. The dramatic poem's many voices serve not only to revise a variety of biblical and literary texts but, ultimately, to put *A Drama of Exile* in dialogue with itself. While *A Drama of Exile* does not provide a definitive answer to the questions it raises about the meaning of suffering, its poetic dynamism suggests a flexible model of revelation as an ongoing process that depends on readers' capacities to hearken.

Similar readerly qualities emerge in novelistic form throughout Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which likewise evokes Romantic ideas through its echoes of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson. *The Story of an African Farm* departs substantially from the form of the realist novel, particularly in the two narrative digressions placed at the heart of Schreiner's story: the chapter "Times and Seasons," with its adaption of Ecclesiastes 3, and the embedded parable "The Hunter," which explicitly confronts the challenge of interpretation. Both the content of Schreiner's parable and the reflection that follows this story highlight the multiplicity of truth and

suggest that readers apprehend such truths gradually, as an ongoing and transformative act of discovery. Although Schreiner's experimental novel plays more freely with form than does George Eliot's historical novel *Romola* (1862–63), Eliot, too, foregrounds hermeneutic dilemmas and uses parable to advance a didactic mode that prompts the sympathetic, affective responses of her readers. In this context, Eliot's narrator emerges as a discerning but not authoritative interpreter, one who makes telling remarks about the dangers of relying on any single and stable code for making meaning. Eliot's storytelling privileges narrative forms that depend on the reader's imaginative capacity to grapple with interpretive issues that remain markedly—indeed, productively—unresolved. The difference between Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* and Eliot's *Romola*, then, appears to be more one of degree than of kind, as both novels approach the artistic and reflective modalities invited and demanded by wisdom literature.

By contrast, John Ruskin's *The Queen of the Air* (1869) poses a more pronounced set of formal challenges: the overarching structure of an academic lecture conflicts with the experiential and artistic wisdom that is Ruskin's subject. As my fourth chapter shows, Ruskin stretches this scholarly form to its limits: he revivifies classical and biblical texts to advance an impassioned mythopoesis rather than a disinterested historical analysis. Even so, his creative recovery of personified Wisdom is significantly constrained by the form in which it is embedded. Ruskin, like the other writers in my study, makes self-reflexive remarks about the limits of knowledge, his own included, and calls attention to the reader's active interpretive work; from time to time, however, he advances a forceful, even combative, argumentative stance. These assertions of writerly authority are in keeping with the oratorical voice that a lecture series invites, but they do impede the

dialogic qualities of Ruskin's discussion. Nevertheless, I suggest that *The Queen of the Air* illustrates something crucial about the task of wisdom writing, not in spite of the challenges it reveals but because of them.

The writerly dilemma on view throughout *The Queen of the Air*—which we might identify as the question of how to integrate intellectual and imaginative modes—is hardly unique to Ruskin. On the contrary, similar issues continue to animate critical discussions taking place in the field of literary studies today. These conversations have been recently catalyzed by such scholarship as Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015).<sup>226</sup> This book calls into question the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that Felski, borrowing Ricoeur's phrasing, identifies as dominant in literary studies (1-3). To counter this methodology, Felski advocates for a practice of “postcritical reading” that emphasizes readerly sympathy and self-reflection (11-12). Her thoughtful and ambitious work confronts many challenges, including the issue of how one might launch an argument against the practice of critique without, in so doing, engaging in critique. Indeed, the formal conventions of the scholarly monograph, which demand a reasoned and persuasive stance, render it difficult to express or model interpretive approaches that find their basis in something other than logical argument.

In many ways, the formal challenges illuminated through Felski's *The Limits of Critique* call to mind some of the challenges that I have confronted in writing this dissertation. I have taken up a highly structured academic form with the aim of writing about texts that are open-ended and experimental, texts driven not by a persuasive

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<sup>226</sup> Felski's thought-provoking study has generated numerous critical responses, from the discussion forum on *The Limits of Critique* featured in *PMLA* 132.2 (2017) to the forthcoming special issue of *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* focused on “Religion, Criticism, and the Postcritical” (Summer 2020).

rhetoric but by a heuristic poetics—texts that are everything that a conventional dissertation is not. The resulting disjunction between medium and message has sometimes seemed to me to be an odd, even foolish, choice. Such work might, indeed, be likened to trying to put new wine into old bottles, as in the parable recorded in Matthew 9:14—and the result in this parable is that “the bottles break, and the wine runneth out.”

But then, the Victorian adaptations of biblical wisdom literature that I have considered indicate that there are other metaphors that might help us to reconsider this misalignment between content and form. These Victorian texts raise the prospect that literary forms might be regarded less like fixed containers, as in the parable from Matthew evoked above, and more like the “organic filaments” that Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1833–1834) identifies with literature’s capacity for symbolical renewal (185). Indeed, as an example of a formally disruptive text that is both quixotic and inspiring in its attempts to bridge scholarly discourse and creative wisdom, *Sartor Resartus* has much to offer. Carlyle’s fictitious Editor, who translates the equally fictitious Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh’s “Philosophy of Clothes,” initially positions his work as an academic undertaking: he prefaces his translation by emphasizing the “historical and critical capacity” that, he claims, allows him a dispassionate distance from his subject (11). As the text unfolds, however, it becomes more and more apparent that the Editor is personally affected by Teufelsdröckh’s writings and that these writings are themselves driven by artistic play.

At the heart of *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle revises the metaphors found throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes to reflect on the interpretive dilemmas faced by Teufelsdröckh, the Editor, and Carlyle’s readers. Carlyle’s recourse to this wisdom book is so striking as

to receive mention in Cheyne's commentary on Ecclesiastes: in his discussion of the "elemental force" of its poetic passages, Cheyne remarks, "I cannot help alluding to Carlyle's fine adaptation of its imagery in *Sartor Resartus*" (246). He goes on to trace Carlyle's echoes of Ecclesiastes 1:4 ("One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever"). This resonant passage is by no means the only echo of Ecclesiastes that reverberates throughout *Sartor Resartus*. Carlyle also makes inventive use of the recurring metaphor of profit by which Qohelet explores the concepts of meaninglessness and meaningfulness, beginning in the very first chapter: "What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" (1:3).<sup>227</sup> In *Sartor Resartus*, the Editor employs similar language to probe the frustrations and questions that, he claims, "many a British Reader" must surely be asking: "Whereto does this all lead; or what use is in it?" (204). The Editor's initial response is to reject the very concept of value, remarking, "in the way of replenishing thy purse . . . it leads to nothing, and there is no use in it" (204). He goes on, however, to redefine this concept and to say that, if Teufelsdröckh's convoluted writings have allowed the reader to perceive "that thy daily life is girt with Wonder," then the reader has assuredly "profited beyond money's worth" (204-5). In addition to underscoring Carlyle's resistance to utilitarian calculations, these statements recall the language of Ecclesiastes, which similarly uses the metaphor of monetary profit to evoke that which cannot be quantified.

Carlyle's reflections on instrumental versus inherent value are promising, to my mind, because they suggest that an element of hopefulness underlies what might

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<sup>227</sup> Versions of this question recur in subsequent verses, including Ecclesiastes 2:11, 3:9, 5:16, 7:11, and 10:10. See Mills's discussion of this book's reliance on "commercial idiom" (14-15).

otherwise be a futile task. They suggest that Teufelsdröckh's foolishness, described by the Editor as the product of his "mad Pilgrimings" (123), might also be a form of courage, if not of wisdom, by virtue of his indefatigable refusal to be stymied by seeming contradictions. Academic and artistic modes of writing (or historical and imaginative approaches to biblical texts, for that matter) might be difficult to align in a perfectly tailored fit, to use Carlyle's sartorial metaphor. But these imperfections in alignment need not foreclose our efforts to situate them in a productive dialogue. Indeed, the very hermeneutics of suspicion that Felski identifies as a defining characteristic of critique is, in Ricoeur's formulation, but one part of a dialectical model that includes a hermeneutics of restoration. Ricoeur's concept of creative interpretation, which I have mobilized throughout my study, brings together rigorous critique and personal reflection.

As my examples from Victorian literature demonstrate, this conceptual rapprochement is important because to abandon either element of this twofold model appears to be equally unwise. Even as the Victorian texts that I have analyzed illuminate some of the higher criticism's limitations, they achieve this work only in the context of their openness to this criticism. After all, to refuse to hold up biblical texts to logical, rational scrutiny in the name of preserving religious mysteries would be to risk inviting a dangerous form of anti-intellectualism. Cheyne himself suggests as much in the prefatory material to his commentary on the biblical wisdom books, remarking that "if the Anglican Church is ever to renovate her theology and to become in any real sense undeniably the Church of the future, she cannot afford to be careless or intolerant of attempts to modernise our methods of criticism and exegesis" (2). While Cheyne does not seem to have predicted the resurgence of various forms of Christian fundamentalism that

we have seen in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, his remarks align in prescient ways with Daniel L. Pals' recent retrospective analysis of shifts in attitude among late nineteenth-century British Christians. Pals draws attention to the widespread acceptance of the higher criticism among "the majority of scholars and a fair portion of educated laity in each of the British churches" by the 1890s, an acceptance that he identifies as contrasting markedly with the American context, which witnessed a "bitter falling-out" between "Fundamentalists and liberals." Furthermore, Pals argues that the British attitude of openness can be at least partly attributed to the many different Victorian "Lives of Christ" published in the preceding decades that sought to find a middle ground between historical, literary, and devotional approaches to the Bible (152-53).<sup>228</sup>

As these examples underscore, creative interpretations of biblical texts such as those examined in my study have much to contribute to the broader cultural project of navigating conceptual shifts from fundamentalist mindsets toward more pluralistic ones. This project remains ongoing, as Jude V. Nixon reminds us in his discussion of the controversies engendered by *Essays and Reviews* (1860). Nixon concludes his analysis with the sobering reminder that "the war on literalism is still being fought on all fronts," citing twenty-first century social and political issues in the United States (74). Efforts to challenge the enduring ethos of literalism, a mindset that depends on a rigid fixation with the letter of a text, might well take a page from Victorian rewritings of biblical wisdom literature. These creative interpretations revivify textual metaphors, reframing the

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<sup>228</sup> Among the works that Pals discusses are John Seeley's *Ecce Homo* (1865), F. W. Farrar's *The Life of Christ* (1874), Henry James Coleridge's *The Public Life of Our Lord* (1874), G. S. Drew's *The Son of Man* (1875), and John Cunningham Geikie's *The Life and Words of Christ* (1877). These studies offered a devotional yet thoughtful response to the skeptical and historical precedents set by David Friedrich Strauss and Ernest Renan, both of which approached Jesus as human rather than as Christ.

concept of inspiration from a limiting paradigm of divine dictation to a more capacious appreciation for literary craftsmanship.

My own phrase *forming wisdom* emphasizes the dynamic qualities of this craftsmanship, as my participle verb calls attention to present activity. This temporal aspect is similar to that evoked in Ecclesiastes 12:12, “Of *making* many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (emphasis mine). These expressions simultaneously convey finitude and eternity. Moreover, the note of *memento mori* suggested by this passage might give rise to an expression of *carpe diem*, much as it does in Carlyle’s use of Ecclesiastes. He exhorts in *Sartor Resartus*, “Up, up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called To-day, for the Night cometh when no man can work” (149). Evoking at once Ecclesiastes 3:9, John 9:4, and Hebrews 3:13, he declares that the recognition of limitation can intensify a sense of urgency and innovation, much as it does in Carlyle’s writerly play.<sup>229</sup> Even today, literary scholars might profitably turn to the Victorians for inspiration about how we can revitalize our understanding of the potentialities latent in religious discourse, as well as in the practice of its interpretation. Through their thoughtful responses to the higher criticism, wisdom writers from Carlyle to EBB to MacDonald to Eliot to Ruskin to Schreiner remind us that there is a time to challenge and a time to affirm, a time to search and a time to savour, a time to criticize and a time to create.

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<sup>229</sup> It is evident that Carlyle borrows from all three of these texts. Cf. Ecclesiastes 9:10, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might; for *there is* no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest”; John 9:4, “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work”; and Hebrews 3:13, “But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”

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