OUTLINES AND APOLOGIAS: LITERARY AUTHORITY, INTERTEXTUAL TRAUMA, AND THE STRUCTURE OF VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN SAGE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian and Edwardian sages were authors who worked, following the decline of organized religion among the educated classes in Britain, to restore a sense of unitary meaning to the world. As George Landow observes, the sage’s system is, by its very nature as a philosophy that attempts to explain the entire world, unprovable, and the sage’s authority is thus derived from his ability to interpret the world vividly, plausibly, and as a whole. Since the sage’s authority cannot be established by conventional means, it ultimately derives, as Susan Morgan notes, from the sage’s “lived experience.”

This dissertation analyzes the implications of sage rhetoric for the genre of autobiography. The sage autobiographer must show that every aspect of his life serves as proof of his theories and, being a public figure, he invariably has experienced incidents—primarily lost literary controversies and poor textual reception—that seem to refute his theories. The premise of this dissertation is that these literary disasters constitute “intertextual traumas” that disrupt the sage’s literary authority and textual identity, that serve as signs that the sage seemingly cannot interpret. Sage autobiographies, I argue, are elaborately intertextual attempts to narrate, and thus to interpret and to control, such incidents of intertextual trauma. Unlike most autobiographers, the sage references and interprets preexisting biographies of himself and other rival accounts of his life because to do otherwise would be to permanently cede his authority to interpret the world.
Dedicated to my wife Emily
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION


In the opening paragraphs of the seventh (“Dissection”) chapter of his *Experiment in Autobiography*, H. G. Wells writes:

If you do not want to explore an egoism you should not read autobiography. If I did not take an immense interest in life, though the medium of myself, I should not have embarked upon this analysis of Memories and records . . . . The reader’s role, the prospect of publication, is kept in view chiefly to steady and control these operations, by the pervading sense of a critical observer. The egoism is unavoidable. I am being my own rabbit because I find no other specimen so convenient for dissection. Our own lives are all the practical material we have for the scientific study of living; the rest is hearsay. The main theme of this book has been exposed in the Introductory Chapter and recalled at intervals. Essentially this autobiography treats of the steady expansion of the interests and activities of a brain, emerging from what I have called a narrow-scope way of living, to a broader and broader outlook and a consequent larger reach of motive. I move from a backyard to Cosmopolis; from Atlas House [where his mother was a servant] to the burthen of Atlas [his attempt to create a World State] (347-48).

As so often happens, here the blunt and introspective Wells states explicitly the rhetorical dynamics that other sage figures carefully leave implicit. In these two paragraphs, Wells sketches the basic goals of the autobiography of a Victorian or Edwardian sage.

The sage, as George Landow among many others has noted, possesses as his distinguishing trait an all-encompassing philosophical system through which he interprets
the universe (cf. Landow *Elegant* 45). For Wells, that philosophy was summed up in his
dream of a World State, a politically and philosophically unified world where everyone
would function in order and everything would possess a definable meaning. As I shall
discuss at more length later, for Wells the overarching meaning of the disunified and
often apparently meaningless present world consists in its potential to be transformed into
the World State. Wells describes his autobiography in terms that would seem to better
befit a treatise. The book is openly designed to illustrate his historical philosophy of a
disorganized, provincial world that is slowly evolving into a unified and progressive
World State, and the book is equally explicit about its use of Wells’s own life as the
evidence in question. It is not surprising, then, that the autobiographies of sages such as
Wells are accused, as Wells readily grants, of egoism of narcissism. The external world
as other and foreign is obliterated; the author’s life and contacts (and, not-so-subtly, the
implied reader’s life and contacts) serve as simple functions of the author’s
understanding.

This much, perhaps, could have been guessed by anyone familiar with the
Victorian and Edwardian sages without the necessity of reading their autobiographies,
though Wells’s openness about these dynamics is surprising. John Holloway identifies
the effort to offer a totalistic meaning for the universe as the sage’s distinguishing
characteristic, while George Landow identifies the idea that the sages have discovered the
truth through their own lived experience as one of the prominent hallmarks of the
discourse (Holloway 11; Landow “Aggressive” 39). The sage autobiography, then, could
well be expected to be a place where the sage endeavors to show that his own life and
works, like the rest of the world, serve to illustrate his philosophy. But Wells’s summary
of his work also identifies the prime sticking point for his autobiography and those of
other sages, which is perhaps less expected and which has escaped critical notice. The
sage’s “lived experience,” at least from the moment of his advent as an author, is not
simply private property, but is also embodied in the written “records” of both the sage’s
own works and others’ writings about him. A unified and coherent “analysis,” as Wells
calls it, of these records in terms of sage’s philosophy is not always easy, and at times in
fact seems impossible. There is also the problem of what Wells refers to as “the reader’s
role” as a “critical observer” of his texts. Wells wishes his audience to view his works
and the world in terms of his belief system, but, as he openly mourns in the work’s initial
pages, he cannot control their responses. He cannot keep his readers from reading and
believing works by his literary rivals, and he cannot control the reception of his own
works. He complains that the professional classes in particular show a “total disregard of
[his] efforts” and “will not adapt [his] results” (Wells Experiment 11).

Once Wells has identified the primary aims of the sage autobiography, he spends
the rest of chapter seven grappling with the problem in the sage autobiography that he has
pinpointed—the profusion of written documents and reader responses for which the sage
cannot easily account. Within two pages, Wells is explaining that the authorized
biography of himself by Geoffrey West deceived its readers. According to Wells, the
reason West’s biography is deceptive is that Wells himself deceived West concerning the
matter of his divorce from his first wife, offering him a “simple attractive story” that
easily fits his “persona” rather a more complex story that would truly account for all the
events in question. Wells explains that he cannot now tell such a simple story in part
because of “the multitude of [his] letters that have never been destroyed” by his “friends
and family” (Experiment 350). These letters cause “vanished details” to be “restored” to the record, and force him to a “readjustment of the all too plausible values I have long set upon them” (Wells Experiment 350). Wells next discusses his 1914 public controversy with Henry James over the nature of the novel—a controversy which he by all accounts lost—and then proceeds to analyze his own humiliating novelistic losing streak: eighteen straight years of novels loathed by the critics and public alike (Experiment 410 ff., 419, 421). Wells wishes to tell a simple story of his life in terms of his philosophy and self-concept, but the fact that his life is not his own, but is embodied in written documents—West’s biography, James’s letters and essays, and his own books and letters—that are read by an unknown and at times uncooperative readership renders this impossible.

The basic narrative situation that Wells describes also occurs in the autobiographies of each of the other Victorian and Edwardian sages who form the basis of my study—Thomas Carlyle’s Reminiscences, John Henry Newman’s Apologia Pro Vita Sua and Autobiographical Writings, and G. K. Chesterton’s Autobiography. Each is attempting to narrate his life in terms of his philosophical system, and to do so is forced to confront texts and reader responses that render this attempt difficult or nearly impossible. Carlyle’s life has been co-opted by a series of biographical portrayals of himself that violate his self-concept as an iconoclastic prophet—most prominently, by a best-selling and wildly inaccurate biography that depicts his life as a simple and entirely conventional rags-to-riches, self-help story. Newman’s public image has been shaped by a host of novels and essays both Catholic and Protestant that treat him as either an unthinking pawn of the Pope or a lying sophist. Chesterton’s reputation has declined following both Shaw’s successful attack in the “Chesterbelloc” essay on the foundations
of his authority and the modernist dismissal of his work. According to the generic
coventions of Victorian and Edwardian intellectual autobiography, rival accounts of the
author’s life are to be minimized or ignored, but in each of these autobiographies, counter
to all expectation, rival texts are summoned, accurately summarized and even quoted, and
systematically interpreted.

Most of the more influential critical accounts of nineteenth and early twentieth
century autobiography would suggest that autobiographies, particularly the
autobiographies of male intellectuals, do not reference unsympathetic accounts of their
subjects. Martin Danahay insightfully analyzes how the autobiographies of Victorian
male intellectuals construct their authors’ authority in his pioneering work on the subject,
*A Community of One*. Danahay describes these autobiographies as solipsistic works that
depict their authors as authoritative and self-contained “autonomous individuals,” and
suggests that the consolidation of authorial authority and identity these works achieve is
dependent on the nature of their assumed audience—middle-class, males who,
sympathetic to the point of homosociality, are willing to ignore or forget all rival
accounts of the author’s life (3-5). While Danahay’s theory doubtless explains many
Victorian autobiographies, it not only fails to apply to the works I am considering, but
seems to suggest that Victorian intellectual autobiographies cannot be intertextual in the
manner I have described. Trev Broughton has perceptively asserted that in Victorian
male biography “intertextual valences were not as straightforward, their influence as
irresistible, nor their relationship to male power as direct as is commonly supposed,” and
has persuasively critiqued “Danahay’s model of a solipsistic male self” on the grounds
that it “cannot account for the disruptive effects of ‘other’ voices” (10, 29-30). However,
her very original analysis, to which I am in many ways indebted, relies on an exceedingly broad definition of intertextuality, and so fails to trace the ways in which any particular biographical work impinges on the authority of any particular autobiographer (cf. Broughton 11-12). Linda Peterson usefully discusses British spiritual autobiography as a primarily hermeneutic (rather than narrative) project, but does not anticipate an autobiography that is in large part and at key moments a hermeneutic analysis of other lives of the autobiographer. More generally, as the influential autobiographical theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have noted, the relation between autobiographies and contemporary “biographical accounts” of their subjects remains an unexplored area in autobiographical theory as a whole (38).

Perhaps because the theoretical frames from which critics are likely to approach Victorian and Edwardian autobiography are not designed to explain the phenomenon, the few critics who have identified references in nineteenth and early twentieth century autobiographies to other accounts of the author’s life have not fully explored the ramifications of their discovery. David Amigoni, in particular, observes that Carlyle’s Reminiscences explicitly reference Margaret Oliphant’s Life of Edward Irving—a work that narrates Carlyle as a character—but then proceeds to focus his analysis on how Oliphant’s representation of Irving impinges on Carlyle’s text, leaving Oliphant’s representation of Carlyle himself unmentioned and unanalyzed (“Displacing” 130-34). Many critics have noted that Newman’s Apologia is a response to Charles Kingsley’s What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean? (the Apologia is explicit on this point), but the Apologia’s relation to other narratives of Newman’s life, or even the specific
philosophical and rhetorical difficulties Kingsley’s attack causes Newman, have remained insufficiently explored.

The only common trait shared by Carlyle, Newman, Wells, and Chesterton is that their contemporaries recognized them as modern prophets, as what later critics would call “sages.” My project is an attempt to account for this baffling and critically overlooked phenomenon: Why would the totalizing sages, of all literary figures, write such elaborately and unconventionally intertextual autobiographies, when intertextuality in literature is virtually synonymous—in the work of Julia Kristeva, who coined the term, is synonymous—with heteroglossia and the break-up of the author’s narrative and interpretive control? What risks and benefits does this intertextual structure have for the sage’s authority, and how are the autobiographies’ overall rhetorical and narrative dynamics shaped by this intertextual element?

My primary contention is that the unconventional, intertextual character of the autobiographies of these sages follows of necessity from the sage’s basic rhetorical position. The sage both offers a totalistic vision of the universe and possesses an intertextual existence as subject or author of a vast amalgam of texts. For the sage to grant that there are public texts (worse, texts that represent and embody his “lived experience”) that cannot be understood in terms of his system is to admit the insufficiency of his system as a means of interpreting the universe; it is, in short, to grant that the sage is not a sage, but a failure or a false prophet. The sage per se must be able to account for and interpret his own works and his textual existence in the works of others within the terms of his own philosophy. The sages whom I will examine turn to autobiography, to the explication of their major works and the most important works
about them by other authors, only after an unexpected loss of interpretive control of their
textual existence. Typically, this loss takes the form of either a public, literary defeat at
the hands of an intellectual opponent or a massive failure in textual reception. A public,
textual failure on the sage’s part constitutes an event that cannot in any apparent way be
interpreted within the terms of his system, apparent evidence that there are phenomena
for which he cannot account and vast bodies of readers he cannot persuade or control.
The sage’s identity as a sage is lost or damaged; the sage passes from being an
influential, all-interpreting prophet to a disempowered object of the interpretations of
others, from the proclaimer of a prophetic message whose value is fixed to a producer
whose products’ value varies according to supply and demand.

I term this event as it is narrated in the autobiographies I am analyzing to be an
“intertextual trauma,” for it possesses the same primary traits as Freudian trauma (an
unexpected and invasive triggering event, a subsequent loss of a sense of mastery and
internal unity, and a lingering compulsion to repeat the triggering event) but originates
and takes effect only on a textual level. The sage as implied author of a group of texts
loses his authority and internal coherence when varied and generally unsympathetic
interpretations of his works become as prominent as the works themselves; the author is
dispossessed as the locus of meaning for the text. As Newman says most explicitly, the
sage’s internal unity has been fractured and he has been displaced as author of his works
by a “scarecrow which is dressed up in [his] clothes” and a “phantom . . . which gibbers
instead of [him]” (Newman Apologia 361). Generally, this attack occurs at the hands of a
rival prophet or teacher of universal meaning (the sage becomes evidence that some
system other than his own is true) or at the hands of the rising forces of academic
specialism (literary, scientific, or historical), which discount the existence and possibility of a universal interpreter of any kind (the sage becomes evidence that no universal philosophy can be true).

The distinctive rhetorical aim of the sage autobiography, paradoxically accomplished through a narrative of the sage’s loss of authority and an exegesis of texts relevant to it, is to restore the sage’s authority as a universal interpreter. If the sage’s loss of authority can itself become evidence of the truth of the sage’s system, the sage’s authority will be restored in a flourish of interpretive mastery. It will seem that the sage, as he claims, can successfully interpret anything. If, on the other hand, the sage’s own textual existence defies his attempts at coherent interpretation and narration, the sage’s authority as a universal interpreter will be singularly damaged, as his theories will seem unable to account for his (textually embodied) lived experience. It will seem that the sage cannot explain himself, much less the world. While the autobiographies I am analyzing are widely varied in style and structure, as widely varied as the philosophies of the sages who wrote them, they are all attempts to face the same rhetorical situation, one few other biographies of their time period confront directly. They evoke the intertextuality that Julia Kristeva and Walter Benjamin consider characteristic of modernism (to the point where each of my sages has been identified by various critics as protomodernist) in an attempt to tackle and control the nihilistic forces of modernity.

My analysis of the sage autobiography builds most fundamentally off of the fifty years of critical work on the sage discourse that have followed the publication of John Holloway’s foundational study *The Victorian Sage* (1953). Like many other critics, I take George Landow’s *Elegant Jeremiahs* to be the most detailed and authoritative
discussion of the sage discourse as a rhetorical form. While John Holloway’s groundbreaking study *The Victorian Sage* is invaluable in reidentifying the sages as a single school sharing a common narrative rhetoric, Landow’s work has much more specifically identified the nature and appeal of this rhetoric. Most of the revisionist work done on the sage discourse since Landow’s work is still heavily dependent on his terms and definitions, which I will employ throughout the present work. In many ways, my project is an attempt to analyze and account for a basic tension in George Landow’s taxonomy of the sage discourse in his influential book *Elegant Jeremiahs*.

Of the central traits of the sage as defined by Landow, I am primarily concerned with three. First, the sage depicts himself as a master interpreter, an omnicient understanding eye that can successfully read a world full of “mysteriously encoded” signs (Landow *Elegant* 45). In an image frequently employed by Carlyle, the sage is Daniel, able to read the mysterious writing on the wall at Belshazzar’s feast (cf. Landow *Elegant* 44). As both Landow and Holloway note, the sage derives much of his authority from being able, in an age increasingly skeptical of traditional systems of universal meaning like the Anglican church, to interpret the disparate materials of the modern world as a coherent whole (Landow *Elegant* 22-23). In an age desperate for meaning, the sage’s virtuoso ability to interpret the universe as a whole is self-authorizing (Holloway 11). One primary means by which the sage achieves this effect is by the interpretation of what Landow calls symbolical grotesques, bizarre or horrific scenes that seem to defy the possibility of coherent meaning, such as Carlyle’s “Amphibious Pope” and “Typhus Widow” in *Past and Present* (Landow *Elegant* 76). If the sage can cause the grotesque itself to fit into a philosophical system and coherently mean, sage writing implicitly
suggests, surely the rest of the universe bears the meaning that the sage reads in it (cf. Landow *Elegant* 60, 76, 83).

The second trait, the appeal to ethos, is closely tied to the first. Landow notes as perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the sage discourse that far more than most authors, the sage is dependent on ethos, the appeal to credibility, as a means of persuasion (cf. Landow *Elegant* 152, “Aggressive” 39). Since the sage teaches an all-encompassing universal system that of its nature cannot be conclusively proved, and critiques the narrowly rationalistic and empiricist approaches to the truth advanced by much Victorian science and philosophy, the sage cannot rely on logos as his primary means of proof. As Kierkegaard famously observed, it is impossible for an individual subject to objectively and conclusively establish the nature of a universe of which he is a part. An all-encompassing system is inherently incapable of conventional proof. As a result, Kierkegaard less famously observed, such teachers of universal truth as apostles and prophets can rely only on their own status as messengers—in rhetorical terms, their ethos—to verify their message. This variance in available sources of proof, Kierkegaard claims in his essay of the same name, is precisely “The Difference between a genius and an Apostle” (341, 347-48). Landow considers the sages’ reliance on ethos to be, in fact, even more extreme than that of the biblical prophet or apostle. According to Landow, since the sage cannot claim to be directly inspired by God, he must establish through more indirect means his status as one specially equipped to convey the meaning of the world; the sage must seem like the sort of person who, if there were a meaning to the world, would happen to know it (Landow *Elegant* 29, 155-56). Thus the sage’s
persuasive ability depends largely on the ethos of his work, on the sort of implied author that the tone and narrative arc of his work create.\textsuperscript{4}

The third trait is in many ways responsible for the success of the sage’s appeal to ethos. As Susan Morgan notes, the Victorians commonly held that truth is derived from “lived experience” (Susan Morgan 223-24; cf. Landow \textit{Elegant} 166, “Aggressive” 39). Darwin’s findings, for instance, were as rhetorically authorized by his years as meticulous and original labor constructing his theory as by the scientific evidence for the theory itself. The sage depicts the truth he preaches as arising out of the depths of his entire lived experience, a rhetorical strategy Landow calls “the sage as master of experience,” and which forms the topic of Chapter 4 of \textit{Elegant Jeremiahs}. This rhetoric, which possesses clear roots in Romanticism’s idealization of the lone individual, allows the sages a means of proof independent of empiricism or strict rationalism. Since, as Landow also notes, the sage depicts himself as an eccentric who can see the truth better for his location on the margins of a largely corrupt society, the sage’s experiences are not likely to overlap with those of most of his readers and where the experiences do overlap, the sage can be expected to have seen them in a light his readers did not (cf. Landow \textit{Elegant} 23, 52). Finding the truth in a comparatively rare experience—a boyhood in preindustrial Scotland for Carlyle, a tutelage under T. H. Huxley for Wells—or in an entirely idiosyncratic personal perspective gives the sage a basis of authority both rhetorically compelling and not easily refutable. Consequently, the sage’s close connection between his belief system and the pieces of his life he chooses to narrate plays an important role in validating his belief system.
If Landow’s writing has a fault, it is the defect of all taxonomic systems; to define anything, one must consider it in an ideal state, in a state devoid of complications, distortions, and failures. While I consider Landow’s work to be foundational for my own, there are spots of potential tension between his categories that deserve examination. I agree with Landow that for a piece of writing to truly be successful sage writing each of the traits he mentions must be present and in operation. But since these traits potentially contradict or undercut each other, the sage’s rhetoric is bound by its internal logic to fall apart at times. The relation between the sage’s claim to interpret all phenomena, dependence on ethos as a means of persuasion, and insistence on lived experience as a basis for his ethos must often be a vexed one. Not all lived experience is beneficial to one’s ethos and many life experiences seem to defy coherent interpretation of any kind, much less interpretation in terms of an overarching philosophy. A primary aspect of the sage that the body of critical work on the subject seems effectively to overlook is that the sage is a public figure, and as a public figure has many lived experiences that do not take place on the margins of society witnessed by himself alone. He is, rather, represented in large numbers of published texts that frequently take the form of critical scrutiny. It is hard, for instance, to see how Wells’s oft-retold literary defeat at the hands of James or Chesterton’s similarly well known defeat at the hands of Shaw could serve as a basis for their authority, though these are both textually embodied lived experiences. But, if the sage by definition can interpret anything in terms of his system, somehow these textual events must be able to serve as a basis, rather than a problem, for his authority.

Landow’s work implies and at times states the importance that autobiography, a narrative of lived experience, possesses for the sage project. However, the manner in
which the sages other than Newman respond to damaging portrayals in other texts is, strangely, a subject usually overlooked in the study of the sage discourse, and Landow discusses Newman only rarely.\textsuperscript{5} My inquiry into the sage autobiography thus endeavors both to explore unexamined tensions in Landow’s analysis of the sage discourse and to extend and nuance Landow’s conclusions by applying them to and testing them against a specific genre and rhetorical situation. In Landow’s terms, the sage who must confront damaging public texts about himself is placed in a rhetorical impasse, in which the sage’s sources of authority are split against each other; my analysis is an attempt to see how four prominent sages got around this impasse, and what this tells us about each of their philosophical systems and about the sage discourse as a whole.

However, the attempt to study how the sage autobiography accounts for earlier analyses of the sage’s life and thought is beset about by critical quandaries, which is perhaps why the matter has remained unexplored. The critical problems seem to be three: 1. The difficulty of defining sage autobiography as a subgenre. Since critics disagree on both who is a “sage” and what constitutes an “autobiography,” “sage autobiography” may seem a phrase too vexed for profitable use in analysis.
2. The danger of falling into what is sometimes known as the referential fallacy. It is difficult to see how one can discuss the manner in which an autobiography deals with public blows to the author’s ethos without making the argument fundamentally dependent on extratextual events and an extratextual world. Some prominent literary critics have argued that no extratextual world exists to analyze; other prominent critics have granted an extratextual world does exists, but consider it to lie outside the purview of literary
criticism, which is by nature confined to the textual. Any analysis that depends on referentiality could easily seem too theoretically vexed to succeed.

3. The danger of falling into what is sometimes known as the intentional fallacy. Any discussion of how an author attempts to recover his ethos by means of autobiographical narration runs a serious risk of seeming to presume that the critic can divine the author’s thoughts (as the language of this sentence itself evidences). Post-Roland Barthes, such divination has been seen as a basic fallacy by literary studies as a whole.

II. Methodology: Defining Sage Autobiography

The primary difficulty of many studies of the sage discourse is that the term “sage” is defined vaguely, and then applied in situations where, due to this diffuse definition, the term illuminates little. While the term “Victorian sage” is often used in literary criticism, and various arguments have been held over whether this or that author should be considered a sage, relatively few authors have attempted to define the term itself. John Holloway’s foundational definition of the sage, while legitimate and deeply important to the study of the subject, suffers somewhat from its vagueness. He defines the sage as a writer who depicts the universe as an interconnected, meaningful whole, and whose writings persuade the reader to accept this message through extrarational means—by tone, exhortation to moral insight, and vivid description of a world where all things are indeed interconnected and meaningful (Holloway 291, 294, cf. 10, 14). While this definition is no doubt valid, it suffers from the possibility of overextension; in the terms of Aristotelian definition, Holloway’s categories are necessary but not sufficient. Since this definition could apply as easily to a conventional preacher like Charles Spurgeon or a
mystic like William Butler Yeats as to those writers that the Victorians and Edwardians recognized and grouped together as prophets, Holloway’s definition tells more about the Victorian and Edwardian penchant for systems of meaning than about the dynamics of the sage discourse as such. This tendency to overly broad definition finds its most extreme expression in Carol Christ’s revisionist essay “The Hero as Man of Letters: Masculinity and Victorian Nonfiction Prose,” where the sage is defined simply as “the Victorian [nonfiction] prose writer,” and Carlyle’s concept of the Hero as Man of Letters is alleged to apply to all writers of nonfiction prose (19-22). By this definition, Samuel Smiles, Margaret Oliphant, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Lamb, Max Beerbohm, Oscar Wilde, and Queen Victoria are all equally sages. Christ posits this definition largely to debunk it, and through debunking it to show that (patriarchal, male-dominated) sage writing is not in fact a distinct rhetorical form, but was, rather, falsely designated as such by literary critics in the 1920s-1950s who wished to valorize nonfiction prose over the “democratized and feminized novel” (26). However, Christ’s definition is too broad, too unrepresentative of current scholarship, and too unsubstantiated by sources from the Victorian period itself for her debunking to possess much weight. An account of the sage discourse that equates it with the whole of Victorian nonfiction prose cannot account for the appeal of the sage’s rhetoric. The writers the Victorians recognized as prophets, Landow notes, rhetorically cast themselves as on the outside of the establishment, at the margins of society; the sage as Christ defines him simply and unapologetically is the establishment.

I hold the act of defining the sage discourse to be meaningful primarily insofar as it helps us understand why and to what effect the Victorians and Edwardians grouped a
number of widely read and widely revered writers together as “prophets” or “sages.”

For this reason I will in large part accept Landow’s definition of a sage, the principal elements of which—totalistic interpretive claims, reliance on ethos as a means of persuasion, use of the grotesque, depiction of the author as social outsider, and belief that truth is found in lived experience—I have already sketched above. When contemporary reviewers, as these pages will show, praise the nonfiction of Newman, Carlyle, Chesterton or Wells it is often for their ability to posit a coherent meaning for the world by reading truths that others miss or for their careful control of literary tone and style; when contemporary reviewers condemn them it is for egotism and misanthropy, for pessimistically condemning the practices of the majority of society on the basis of their personal philosophies. Alone among major definitions of the sage, Landow’s definition systematizes and accounts for the contemporary response the sages received, while remaining sufficiently narrow to be of use as an analytical tool. Hence, I shall depend on it—though as I have discussed above, I will also complicate it somewhat—in these pages hereafter.

More pragmatically, since I am attempting to examine the rhetorical ramifications of the sage position for autobiography as a genre (and vice-versa), it suits my purposes to define the sage discourse as narrowly as possible. While there have been analyses of the autobiographies of individual sages, no one has attempted to critically chart and account for the rhetorical similarities in the autobiographies of the sages as a group. The most reasonable place to start such an exploration is with the autobiographies of figures whose status as sages is generally accepted by both the majority of Victorian and Edwardian reviewers and the majority of current critics. When one is endeavoring to lay down a
general principle, it seems poor methodology to start with exceptions or deviations from the rule. For instance, while Harriet Martineau’s autobiography shares many interesting characteristics with the works I will discuss, Martineau, as Linda Peterson observes, does not in a strict sense occupy a sage position, for she continually depicts herself not as a dangerously original lone outsider, but as the popular spokesperson for another, more important thinker (James Mill, Auguste Comte, etc.) (“Harriet” 174-75, 181). By the same token, Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis* deals with contemporary accounts of Wilde in a complicated and fascinating manner, but, while some critics consider Wilde to participate in a common discourse with the Victorian sages, others consider his satirical works to instead mark and speed the end of the sage discourse.\(^8\) Though it could make for an interesting later project to see how far my conclusions apply to figures not conventionally considered to be sages, if my model does not account for the figures commonly considered sages it can be of little explanatory value.

Thus, I focus my analysis on four figures more or less universally considered to be sages. Thomas Carlyle is identified by George Landow as the founder of sage discourse, merits a chapter in John Holloway’s *The Victorian Sage*, and is discussed in most other major works on the subject (Landow “Aggressive” 33). John Henry Newman receives a chapter of Holloway’s *Victorian Sage*, receives lengthy treatment in David DeLaura’s *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England*, and is also granted sage status in Landow’s *Elegant Jeremiahs* (Landow *Elegant* 177). In any account of the sage, Carlyle and Newman are central figures. However, since Carlyle’s *Reminiscences* and Newman’s *Apologia* were written respectively in 1866-67 and 1864, an analysis of these works alone would be of doubtful applicability with regards to sage autobiography as a
whole; since only two years separate these works in time, the common elements of these works could stem from their common historical moment rather than their common authorship by sage figures. To eliminate this variable, I must also consider the autobiographies of authors who write at a significant remove from the 1860s, but whose status as sages is no more disputable than that of Newman and Carlyle. The Edwardian period was the last epoch to contain figures that strictly fit Landow’s definition of the sage, so I also consider the two most prominent Edwardian sage figures to write autobiographies, H. G. Wells (whose autobiographies were written in 1934 and 1934-42, respectively) and G. K. Chesterton (whose *Autobiography* was published in 1936). The Edwardian sages as a group have attracted less critical attention than the Victorian sages, but Wells’s and Chesterton’s prophetic status is amply attested by a vast body of Edwardian literature and current literary criticism, by a body of work that ranges from Edwin Slosson’s discussion of Chesterton and Wells in his *Six Major Prophets* (1917), to the modernists’ attacks on both figures as “inheritor[s] of the . . . Victorian prophets,” to Patrick Parrinder’s recent study of Wells’s prophetic work, entitled *Shadows of the Future*, and Russell Sparkes’s recent anthology of Chesterton’s writings, entitled *Prophet of Orthodoxy* (Eliot Rev. of *Outline* 71). In short, I will discuss as sages authors who both fit Landow’s definition of the term and who were acknowledged as such by their contemporaries; this combination will allow Landow’s terminology to serve as an analytical tool through which the dynamics of an independently demonstrable Victorian and Edwardian phenomenon can be understood, rather than as an end in itself.

The term “autobiography” is as critically vexed as the term “sage.” Scholars have defined autobiography in a myriad of different ways since the 1960s, with perhaps the
most prominent opinion being Paul De Man’s insistence that the term is undefinable. Of this plethora of approaches to autobiography, I consider Phillipe Lejeune’s definition of the term to be the most serviceable. I prefer Lejeune’s understanding of autobiography in large part because of the element of his theoretical approach to which other critics most often take exception—his insistence that autobiography is distinguished especially by its referential claims. As Lejeune discusses, the rhetorical effect of autobiography as a genre depends on an implicit pact between author and reader, termed by Lejeune “the autobiographical pact” or “referential pact” (cf. Lejeune 18-19, 22). The identity between the name on the title page and that of the protagonist of the work serves as an implicit contract between writer and reader that an autobiography will narrate the life not of a fictional character whose existence is confined to the present work alone but of the personage listed on the title pages of all other books the author has written (cf. Lejeune 11-17). While Lejeune’s description of autobiography, like all other literary criticism, can (and has) been validly critiqued by other critics (primarily on the grounds that there are autobiographical works for which his model cannot account and on the grounds that he is excessively dependent on a Western, legal model of authorship), it aptly explains a significant part of the rhetorical appeal of literary autobiography for which most other critical models of autobiography cannot sufficiently account (cf. Eakin 29-33, 35). However invalid current literary theory may deem the conventional autobiography’s appeal to referentiality, most autobiographies depend on this appeal for much of their rhetorical effect. To put the matter plainly, literary autobiographies are most often read by readers curious about the author listed on the title pages of other books they have enjoyed, and they generally feel cheated if the account of the author offered by the
autobiography cannot be reconciled with the accounts of the author offered by his or her other works and by the works of other writers who have addressed the subject. Moreover, the objections to Lejeune, even if entirely valid, are inapplicable in the context of the current study. If Lejeune’s approach is overly dependent on the modern Western notion of the author and on Western law, so is the mentality of the audience (and authors) whose response (and rhetoric) I wish to analyze—nineteenth and twentieth century Westerners schooled in the Western understanding of the author and living under Western copyright law.

I will differ from Lejeune only in that I will allow memoir (a reminiscence focused on others the author has known or on an event in which the author was involved) to qualify as autobiography, rather than restricting the term to autobiography proper (a reminiscence focused on the self). I expand Lejeune’s definition in this way because the rhetorical difficulty I am studying—the need to account for other texts in which the author is mentioned—occurs in any work in which a sage narrates himself as a significant character and narrates a significant portion of his adult, public life. Thus, whether the sage is the central character of the work (as in autobiography), or merely one of the main characters (as in memoir) is irrelevant for my purposes; this particular definitional question with regard to autobiography as a genre has no explanatory value for my argument. I will therefore decline to participate in the critical debate over whether Carlyle’s Reminiscences should be considered autobiography (as some of his journal entries suggest) or memoir (as the work’s section titles and apparent structure suggest). However the work is classified, Carlyle undoubtably spends a large amount of it narrating
his life, and the work therefore faces the rhetorical difficulties with which I am concerned and qualifies for consideration in the pages that follow.

The rhetorical dilemma of the sage autobiography as I have described it follows both from the referential claims of the sage discourse theorized by Landow\textsuperscript{14} and the referential claims of autobiography theorized by Lejeune: the sage autobiography must account for the major documents by and about the sage in order to maintain the sage’s claim that he can interpret and explain the world. This rhetorical dilemma simply does not occur in a fictionalized autobiography or a poem with autobiographical elements. Carlyle’s \textit{Sartor Resartus} is a masterwork, and Newman’s \textit{Loss and Gain} an important one, but neither faces the task of accounting for the scarecrows of Carlyle and Newman strewn through a wide variety of contemporary books. For this reason, the progress of Diogenes Teufelsdrockh from Byronic Romanticism to the Gospel of Work or of Charles Reding from Anglicanism to Catholicism is considerably smoother, simpler, and more seemingly inevitable than the intellectual development of Carlyle in the \textit{Reminiscences} or of Newman in the \textit{Apologia}. As autobiographical novels and poems elide the rhetorical difficulty that serves as the central focus of my study, I will not consider them here.

In short, a sage autobiography is a document that purports to narrate the life of the author listed on its title page while simultaneously attempting to maintain this author’s persona as a sage, as a universal interpreter of texts and events. This definition, though simple, holds a number of important ramifications. As I have discussed, it excludes a fictional autobiography like \textit{Tono-Bungay} because fictionalized autobiographies do not purport to narrate the lives of their actual authors, and includes a memoir like Carlyle’s \textit{Reminiscences} because the memoir can, and in this case does, narrate the author’s life.
My definition also excludes one of the most famous autobiographies by a sage figure, John Ruskin’s *Praeterita*. In an often referenced passage in the opening pages of *Praeterita*, Ruskin avows that he will write only “of what it gives [him] joy to remember . . . passing in total silence things which [he] ha[s] no pleasure in reviewing,” and that he will assume an audience consisting only of friends (11). This restriction of subject and audience runs contrary to both all of Ruskin’s previous work and Landow’s definition of the Victorian sage. If Ruskin is willing to discuss only events that please him, he has given up the sage claim that he can interpret everything; if Ruskin assumes an audience only of friends, he has given up the sage’s distinctive confrontational relationship with his audience. Thus, while *Praeterita* vividly narrates Ruskin’s development as a master interpreter, the work’s basic rhetorical and narrative structure abandon the claim of sage status that the narrative advances. Consequently, *Praeterita* cannot be said to assert consistently Ruskin’s status as a sage; the abandonment of the sage status that the work’s incoherent ending and Ruskin’s subsequent silent madness suggest is implied from its opening pages. *Praeterita* thus falls outside of the sage autobiography as I have defined it, and will not be considered here. While John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography* does qualify as a sage autobiography, it disproportionately focuses on a period of his life for which there can be no conflicting contemporary written narratives, his early childhood and adolescence. Two-thirds of this rather short book have passed before Mill attempts to narrate himself as an author. For this reason, Mill’s *Autobiography* did not seem a serviceable blueprint for the construction of my general account of how the sage autobiography deals with its particular rhetorical quandaries.
Probably because, as every writer on the subject from Holloway and Landow to their revisionist critics remarks, the sage discourse as it is conventionally received is an overwhelmingly masculine style of rhetoric, my methodological decisions have also indirectly resulted in the exclusively male character of my group of subjects. The Victorian and Edwardian female intellectuals—such as George Eliot and Christina Rossetti—who clearly qualify as sages in Landow’s sense of the term did not write autobiography as I have defined the term, while the Victorian and Edwardian female intellectuals—such as Harriet Martineau and Annie Besant—who did write autobiography as I have defined the term do not clearly qualify as sages in Landow’s sense of the term. Linda Peterson has noted that since female intellectuals were already marginalized, they generally opted not to employ the self-marginalizing rhetoric of the sage discourse. A relatively mainstream intellectual figure (such as a white male) can employ the rhetoric of self-marginalization with effect to a Victorian audience, while a figure already marginalized (such as a woman or non-Caucasian male) needs to minimize that marginalization to gain a hearing; a self-marginalized woman often ends up simply unheard (Peterson “Harriet” 174-75). I have discussed the sage autobiography as a particular pressure point of the sage discourse, where the genre’s rhetorical strategies are pushed almost to breaking. Given the Victorian strictures against women’s self-display and the vast difficulty with which a woman occupied the sage position at all, it is perhaps not surprising that the female sages opted not to pursue autobiography in the strict sense in which I have defined the term, but instead expressed the autobiographical impulse through fictionalized or poeticized autobiography. Thus, the limitations and biases of my
choice of subjects reflect and reveal the limitations and biases of the sage discourse as a rhetorical form during the period I am discussing.\textsuperscript{17}

III. Methodology: Intertextualizing Referentiality and Textualizing Trauma

My definition of autobiography, which, following Lejeune, stresses the referential claims of the genre, could seem to entangle my analysis in the troublesome critical issues surrounding the question of referentiality. Lejeune, however, was sensitive to this possible problem with his work, and dealt with it by recasting the question of referentiality in an intertextual register. Lejeune posits that just as a culture’s idea of verisimilitude is derived by means of its dominant literature rather than directly from the external world, a nonfiction work’s sense of extratextual reference is derived by means of its intertextual references rather than from a direct appeal to the physical world (124). In short, referentiality is intertextuality, a conclusion Lejeune finds supremely true of autobiography (118). As I have discussed above, the autobiography of a literary figure is especially dependent on explicit or implicit reference to other texts.\textsuperscript{18} While most critical approaches to the concept of referentiality either treat the term as meaningless or controversially assume the existence of a knowable extra-textual and extra-linguistic world, Lejeune’s approach allows the critic to meaningfully study the rhetorical effects and consequences of autobiography’s referential claims without becoming entangled in extra-literary arguments about the nature of extra-textual reference. Since the definition of “referentiality” I am employing is not the common definition of the term, and since this definition essentially equates referentiality and intertextuality, I will for the purposes of clarity generally refer in the pages that follow to “intertextual reference” and
“intertextuality” rather than the possibly more confusing and more controversial terms “reference” and “referentiality.”

To minimize subjectivity, in identifying intertextual references I will for the most part rely on a strict understanding of intertextuality as the explicit citation of one text by another text. An explicit textual citation, such as Newman’s direct quotations from Kingsley, can be classified as an intertextual reference without an appeal to authorial intention and without undue speculation on the critic’s part. For the sake of objectivity, I will justify all of my major conclusions with reference to intertextual relations explicitly identified in the autobiographies under consideration. However, the sages often explicitly reference texts that seem to stand in for a much larger body of contemporary publications. As with Kingsley’s pamphlet What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean, the texts openly cited in sage autobiographies often summarize and represent more widely disseminated cultural images of the sages. For this reason, I will sometimes employ a thicker sense of intertextual reference, and will use contemporary texts that the autobiographies do not explicitly reference to situate in a broader literary context those texts that the autobiographies do explicitly reference. In these cases, I will keep speculation to a minimum by primarily using texts that the author of the autobiography under consideration had demonstrably read prior to the completion of the work.

As I have already indicated, I see the use of intertextuality in sage autobiography as conforming to a pattern that I have termed “intertextual trauma.” Consequently, to fully explain my use of intertextuality, I must also explain how I am defining and employing the concept of trauma. In discussing trauma, I depend primarily on Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the topic, particularly in his Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920).
employ Freud because, as I shall shortly discuss, his model of trauma and the process of
working through trauma bears a striking resemblance to the pattern of authority ruptured
and regained I have found in each of the autobiographies under consideration.
Significantly, Freud is also a contemporary of the authors I am discussing—he was ten at
the birth of Wells, eighteen at the birth of Chesterton, twenty-five at the death of Carlyle,
and thirty-four at the death of Newman—and, as the proponent of an all-encompassing
system that purports to explain the whole of human thought and motivation, is something
of a sage himself.19

The dynamics by which the unity of the self is lost and regained in the Freudian
model of trauma resemble the dynamics by which the unity of the sage is lost and
regained in the sage autobiography. This resemblance can best be explained by the
pivotal influence that Victorian and Edwardian-era cultural anxieties concerning the
advent of modernity play in the formation of both the sage discourse and psychoanalytic
theories of trauma. Much of the appeal of sage discourse, as Holloway and Landow
suggest, lies in the sage’s ability to construct and maintain a totalistic system of meaning
in the face of an increasingly intellectually fragmented and increasingly nihilistic
modernity. Freud does not so much invent a new model of trauma as revise and
systematize the collective wisdom of nineteenth-century psychology on the topic, and
since the 1860s medicine had theorized trauma as humanity’s natural response to the
dehumanizing, massifying, and mechanizing nature of modernity (Harrington 32-35;
Micale 128, 134, 137-39; Lerner and Micale 10).20 As Mark Micale notes, in the late
nineteenth century, “the project of theorizing trauma carries special resonance for
professional scientific communities as well as the lay population. Documenting the
possible pathogenesis of modern existence for the human psyche provides a kind of medical-scientific critique of modernity itself” (139).

Since the psychological notion of trauma sketches the individual mind’s response to the threat of modernity and the literary subgenre of the sage discourse represents Victorian and Edwardian England’s most sustained intellectual response to the same threat, Freud’s discussion of the individual’s wounded psyche can by extension but without distortion be transposed into my discussion of the sage’s wounded literary authority. Freud’s analysis of trauma provides me with a precise, contemporary vocabulary through which blows to the authority of the Victorian sage can be pinpointed and explained. As should be apparent, I will employ Freud not so much as a psychologist, but as an acute analyst of the anxieties that surround authorship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In seeing Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle as a book not so much about the dynamics of the human psyche’s attempt to retain a unitary meaning and identity as about the dynamics of a literary narrative’s attempt to depict a world with a unitary meaning and coherent identity, I follow and build off of the work of Peter Brooks, especially his Reading for the Plot, which first identified and discussed Beyond the Pleasure Principle as a book about narrative (cf. Brooks 96-97, 112).

Freud defines trauma as an unexpected event that, due to an individual’s lack of anticipatory fear, passes into the psyche unfiltered and uninterpreted, becoming an alien thing within the self (Freud Beyond 21, 24; cf. Caruth Unclaimed 131-32). Since a traumatic event breaches the barriers that the psyche puts up to defend a person’s sense of individuality and agency from the chaos of external stimuli, the trauma victim afterwards
experiences a severe diminishment in ego that primarily takes the form of a loss of a sense of individual agency (in Freud’s terms, the loss of “a sense of mastery”) (Freud Beyond 21, 24). Seemingly ruled by the traumatic event, the trauma victim is compelled to relive or repeat in memory the traumatic incident until he or she can master it by successfully narrating it in a coherent fashion. After the event is assimilated into the individual’s self-narrative, the uniqueness of the event will be lost, the unity of the self will be restored, and the event itself minimized or forgotten (Freud Beyond 9-10, 24, cf. Caruth Intro. One 5, Intro. Two 153-54). Walter Benjamin, who was himself a younger contemporary of Chesterton and Wells, extends Freud’s understanding of trauma from the self to society, defining the modern as a period of trauma, since in modernity it is no longer possible to narrate the world as a coherent and unified whole; some uninterpretable event or piece of information always breaks in and collapses the system (Benjamin “Baudelaire” 194; cf. Bataille 231, Newmark 236-38). Benjamin attributes the trauma of the modern in part to the unassimilable barrage of published information with which the modern individual is assaulted. As Benjamin and Bakhtin both observe in different terms, the presence of such a multitude of competing voices and texts tends to undermine totalistic systems of meaning. In particular, the idea that objects of interpretation can talk back to the interpreter is a threat to all totalistic systems of interpretation (Benjamin Origin 227).

On these bases, I assert my thesis that, for the all-interpreting sages, the definitive moment of trauma occurs when, following a published literary controversy or failure in textual reception, they begin to be interpreted widely and usually negatively by other authors, newspaper reporters, and the public as a whole. The sages are traumatized by
this switch from interpreter to interpreted and the diminished sense of agency that accompanies it, and this experience comes to represent in their work the possibility of chaos and unmeaning in the universe itself. Their trauma corresponds very closely to the idea of intertextuality that Kristeva, working off Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel,” created: other works have penetrated into and become part of the sages’ works, co-opting their interpretation and destroying their central meaning (Kristeva “Bounded” 36, “Word” 71). In an effort to regain their authority and self-depiction as sages, the sages spend key portions of their autobiographies compulsively repeating the stories of their loss of authority. To create again the universal interpretive matrix they once possessed, the sages usually quote from, summarize, and systematically interpret both their own disputed works and the works of their critics, creating a supremely intertextual autobiography. The sage autobiography attempts to transform Kristeva’s intertextuality into Hegelian dialectic, a superficially similar form with a crucial rhetorical difference—in dialectic, the competing languages present in the text are ultimately resolved into a new master language (cf. Kristeva “Word” 89).

Though the origins of Freudian language in clinical psychology cause it to speak in terms of an individual’s internal drives and intentions, my use of Freudian theories of trauma should not be taken to imply that I am making any claims about the intentions or psyches of the authors I discuss. “Intertextual trauma” is a strictly textual matter: the object of the unexpected blow is the authority and unity of an implied author of a set of literary texts (not the person of the actual author) and agent of the blow is not another person as such but another text. Chesterton and Wells, for instance, were good friends throughout much of their lives, even drinking buddies, but each authored texts that
inflicted blows on the authority of each other’s work; a textual trauma need not imply a psychological trauma. By the same token, I will identify a text’s publication or reception as the triggering event for a textual trauma only if the autobiography under consideration depicts this text’s publication or reception as unexpectedly interrupting or fissuring the authority of the autobiographical subject. In analyzing how the author attempts to recover his ethos following such a blow, I restrict myself to a discussion of how the rest of the autobiographical narrative attempts to control and contain the issues raised by this intertextual reference; I make no claims about the author’s means of recovery beyond the parameters of the autobiography.

IV. Outlines and Apologias: The Argument in Brief

I will begin my argument by discussing Thomas Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*. Carlyle’s *Reminiscences* (1866-67) do not comprise the first sage autobiography—Newman’s *Apologia* precedes the work by two years—but the work serves as a logical starting point for my investigation of the topic. Carlyle has been identified by George Landow as the founder of the sage discourse, and his autobiography pinpoints the foundational issues involved in any sage attempting to write his or her life. The *Reminiscences* identify these foundational issues—the sage’s inability to control either biographical accounts of himself or reader response to his work—in their most elemental form, for the biographies and reader responses with which Carlyle is most concerned are favorable in nature. Carlyle obsessively hates the idea of anyone writing a biography of him, since he has theorized biography as an interpretive act whereby the biographical subject’s life and works are read in reference to a universal schema of meaning. For
anyone, therefore, to write any biography of Carlyle, however laudatory, is for Carlyle to become the object of another’s interpretations and to become dispossessed of his sage status. Carlyle is most concerned with two popular biographies that discuss himself: John Hotten and R. H. Shepherd’s work, which depicts Carlyle as some combination of a Smilesian self-help hero and a genial best-selling author like Thackeray or Dickens, and Margaret Oliphant’s work, which depicts Carlyle as essentially equivalent to his friend Edward Irving, a proto-Pentecostal preacher who died young, thought mad by many. In both works, Carlyle is stripped of his status as unique, solitary oracle, and recast in the terms of the mass market fiction that Hotten published and Oliphant wrote.

Carlyle wrote the Reminiscences as the Second Reform Bill was being debated in parliament, and wrote Shooting Niagara, his vitriolic attack on Disraeli and democracy, shortly after completing the first full draft of the work. The fear of a world where truth is determined by mass vote, where ideas have no inherent value, but vary according to supply and demand, dominates the Reminiscences as thoroughly, if less explicitly, as it does Shooting Niagara. The fickle reader, who is neither converted by Carlyle’s writings nor even infuriated by them, frustrates Carlyle to no end, suggesting that literature is simply a matter of entertainment and economic exchange, not a way of effecting meaningful change. Carlyle’s inability to control his readership threatens his sage status as fully as does his inability to cause others to cease speaking of him. Carlyle is most infuriated with the reception of his recent lecture, published under the title On the Choice of Books. The work sells in vast profusion, and gives him his first taste of mass market popularity. The work sells best in a pirated edition complete with the biographical introduction by Hotten and Shepherd I have discussed above, an introduction calculated
to make Carlyle’s sentiments appear banal and unthreatening. Mass market popularity in a very literal sense means for Carlyle the loss of control over his work. In being elected to mass popularity, he passes into the control of the demos. *The Reminiscences’* famous hostility towards both the literary world and the world at large are an attempt to shed himself of this mass audience. Like Gideon, Carlyle attempts to winnow his followers down to the elect, to those who are truly chosen, so as to restore his work to possessing stable value. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, he seeks “temporal failure as a sign of election,” as confirmation that his prominence in the “literary field” does not depend on consumer demand (40, 46). The vast unpopularity of the work when posthumously published constitutes an ironic success for Carlyle’s narrative rhetoric.

John Henry Newman’s *Apologia* is particularly useful as a reference point for this study since the *Apologia’s* intertextual relations with other accounts of the author’s life are both critically well known and exceptionally explicit in the work itself. Newman writes the *Apologia* in a singularly difficult rhetorical position. He has been vilified in works like Elizabeth Harris’s *From Oxford to Rome* for his utter and even unthinking obedience to his ecclesiastical superiors and has been praised in the works of his superior Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman for the same characteristic. He has also been attacked in the works of authors such as Charles Kingsley for the opposite characteristic, an extreme intellectual independence; these works depict Newman as an enticing sophist who will be bound neither by fact nor vow, who is loyal to no one beyond himself, and who acknowledges no reality beyond his own imagination. The rhetorical bind in which these attacks place Newman—if he refutes the charge of sophistry, he seems to grant the charge of intellectual subservience; if he refutes the charge of subservience, he seems to
grant the charge of sophistry—is a metaphysical bind as well. For reasons I will discuss later, the traditionalist groups such as the Catholic Church and Anglo-Catholicism that depended on systematic logic as a means of reaching the truth tended to reason their way to the view of Newman as subservient, while groups such as the scientific community that depended on empiricism as a means of reaching the truth tended to induce their way to the view of Newman as sophist. A Newman trapped between the competing views of himself mentioned above is also a Newman trapped in the metaphysical systems of others.

Newman’s *Apologia* is an attempt to narrate himself within the terms of his own philosophical system while escaping this rhetorical and metaphysical double-bind. In the opening pages of the work, Newman appeals to the rhetoric of a trial, and uses this to establish documentary evidence as the only reliable standard for judging his guilt or innocence with regard to the charges that Kingsley and others have made against him. This move authorizes the *Apologia*’s unconventional structure—not so much a traditional narrative as an anthology of Newman’s letters and writings woven together through a dazzling display of interpretive commentary. The work thus becomes a mirror of Newman’s philosophy of the economy, in which truth consists of a complicated series of relations between variegated texts and ideas, a series of relations that also must be in some measure simplified and rhetorically directed so that a given audience can comprehend it. The *Apologia* also places an existential stress on the motives and decisions of a protagonist who inhabits a world that possesses no clear meaning. Neither the rationalist nor the empiricist attacks on Newman have meaning in the context of this work, in which individual facts to do not possess isolated, self-evident meaning, and logic
does not necessarily lead to truth. More than any other sage, Newman embeds in the very structure of his autobiography the metaphysical assumptions of his system; perhaps for this reason, Newman’s autobiography is the most popularly and critically successful of the sage autobiographies.

With Wells we pass into the Edwardian sages, who, with the rise of specialism in the academy and nihilism in philosophy, face an intellectual climate considerably more hostile to general systems of meaning than that which their Victorian counterparts encountered (cf. Helmling 117). Wells, unlike Carlyle and Newman, grants that the present world and his present self are without coherent meaning, but hopes through his autobiography to create a world and self that possess a unified meaning. He begins the *Experiment in Autobiography* mourning that his writings, despite their vast sales, have not been able to effect the end that he had intended for them: the production of the World State. Wells is particularly bothered by the results of his literary controversies with G. K. Chesterton and with Henry James. Chesterton and James have both publicly defeated Wells in controversy by pinpointing the primary problem of his futuristic system—its inability to account for and give meaning to humanity as it currently exists. James in particular argues that Wells’s works are literarily flawed, for they do not convincingly account for the motives and the actions of individual characters. Since James becomes the idol of a younger generation of writers who are skeptical about all systems of universal meaning and pride themselves on their increasing specialization, his critique on Wells is often repeated.

Wells faces the threat of James in his *Experiment* by recasting the sage in specialist terms. In an increasingly specialized world, the sage Wells is a specialist in
generalizations, a figure necessary if the disparate branches of knowledge are to be reconciled into a coherent whole. Wells’s inability to understand particular individuals or objects becomes within the terms of the narrative an intellectual asset. In a world of specialization, to possess one skill is to lack another; thus, if Wells could explain the particular, he could not explain the whole. In the *Experiment*, the world and Wells’s self hold together in the general terms of an “outline,” in the generalities one can use to describe them as a whole. This outline takes coherent shape from the progression of self and world towards a Utopian future, not from the coherence of self or world at any one point the present. Wells will grant any particular charge against him, in order to be granted the authority to recontextualize the event in a larger progression towards the future.

Wells’s second autobiography, *H. G. Wells in Love*, narrates Wells’s obsessive promiscuity in terms of his audience relations. If he is to give meaning to the world, the world as a whole must accept his authority and his ideas and not talk back. In a very literal sense, the world must love him. Wells describes his quest for audience relations as a search for his “Lover-Shadow,” the ideal audience, and the women he most obsessively discusses seem to be surrogates for his literary rivals, versions of them as (at least initially) pliant and worshipful of Wells. Rebecca West represents modernism in general and Henry James—on whom she had penned a monograph—in particular, while Odette Keun—a humorist and former Catholic nun—represents Chesterton. Ultimately, none of these audiences are docile enough to solidify Wells’s authority, and he is left dreaming of a future audience, “some distant vestige of his lover-shadow,” who will solidify his authority.
Chesterton’s *Autobiography* attempts to defend both his sage work and his unusual position as a sage. Uncommonly for a sage, Chesterton held that the populace was on the whole right, and the opinions of the mass of humanity were invariably accurate. He taught that popular legends, even any story enjoyed by a very large group of people over a very large time, were true, as the stories must have touched something in human nature to retain their popularity. Chesterton held these positions as a means of keeping his own skepticism towards the world, indeed towards even the very existence of material phenomena, at bay. He retains a sage’s confrontational outsider stance, however, as he often addresses himself to intellectuals (whom he considers misguided as a class) and as he considers the masses he admires to have begun under the influence of capitalist culture to fall from their collective wisdom. In keeping with his system, Chesterton’s authority has been most damaged by the attacks of George Bernard Shaw, who argued that Chesterton was either utterly individual and therefore unrepresentative of the populace or utterly derivative and therefore of little intellectual merit, and by the attacks of the modernists T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who granted that Chesterton represented the populace but did not consider the populace to be a valid source of authority of any kind. To deal with these attacks, Chesterton’s autobiography narrates himself as a man unusual among intellectuals in that he has acknowledges his ties to and dependence on the rest of humanity. In a Chestertonian paradox, his true originality consists in his lack of self-conscious originality.

In dealing with the modernists, Chesterton faces a particular dilemma. If he counters the modernists’ charges against him by arguing that the value of a literary work does indeed derive from its popularity (a point he has made against them previously), he
has put forth an argument that condemns himself along with the modernists. Late in life, Chesterton was popular only as a detective story writer and radio personality, and his nonfictional sage writings went largely unread. Consistent with his own reasoning, Chesterton’s autobiography accepts his literary identity as deriving primarily from his journalism and detective fiction. Chesterton even depicts his popular creation Father Brown (or, at least, Father John O’Connor, described in the Autobiography as the model of Father Brown) as possessing authority over himself, proclaiming Father Brown/O’Connor to be responsible for his conversion to Catholicism. Chesterton’s willingness to allow his identity to be defined in terms of the response of actual readers to his work knows no parallel in the sage autobiography; in fact, in the terms of the sage discourse, accepting the authority of the audience seems to constitute abandonment of one’s status as a sage. However, in a Chestertonian paradox, this concession proves to be the basis for Chesterton’s restoration as a sage. Chesterton’s Father Brown stories comprise a modern legend wherein the universe has a discernible meaning knowable by those who employ Chestertonian faith and common sense, and unknowable by empiricists like Sherlock Holmes. The persistence of this myth as a best-selling set of stories and as a major influence in its genre—Chesterton created the subgenres of clerical detective fiction and the metaphysical detective story—validates Chesterton’s reception in the terms of his philosophical system. In a move that suggests the afterlife of the sage discourse, the sage survives, though displaced into the realm of legend; however, this displacement does not falsify Chesterton’s philosophical system, since for Chesterton, popular legends are true.
The sage autobiography—the sage’s attempt to interpret, narrate, and otherwise account for texts concerned with his life in terms of his philosophy—represents one of the sages’ most serious efforts to face the increasing profusion of texts and readers that is a hallmark of modernity and, for Benjamin, of the modern as trauma. Hence, in analyzing the narrative rhetorics of sage autobiographies I am also analyzing how the sages confronted the very changes in the academy’s construction of knowledge and evidence and in the publishing world’s construction of readership and authorship that are often considered to have caused the inevitable decline of the sage discourse. For this reason, the study of the sage autobiography is also a study in the afterlife of sage discourse. The endings of Wells’s and Chesterton’s autobiographies suggest the future of sage autobiography as a genre. In the face of an increasingly professionalized intellectual world and an increasingly skeptical readership, Wells can summon the type of audience required to validate his authority as a sage only by appealing to the tactics of science fiction and imagining his future Lover-Shadow; in the face of the same threats, Chesterton can construct the type of interpreter required to validate his authority as a sage only by appealing to the tactics of detective fiction and imagining Father Brown. With the death of the Edwardians, sage autobiography as such has come to the end of the line. As the examples of Wells and Chesterton imply, sage autobiography’s quest for a meaningful, integrated world and self will henceforth be carried out primarily in genre fiction, in science fiction’s creation of alternate worlds and detective fiction’s effort to unmask the truth. The fictional alien and the fictional detective are the sages of the second half of the twentieth century.
In my conclusion, I discuss a trend that serves as an exception to this rule, one way in which the sage autobiography has outlived the Edwardians: a late-born variant of the subgenre in which the protagonist is not a British intellectual who rhetorically casts himself as a figure from the margins, but an Asian intellectual who literally resides at what the Edwardians would have considered the margins of the world. As Edward Said and many later critics have noted, British intellectuals for centuries have imagined the Orient as a foil for and antithesis of British thought and culture (cf. Said 1-2). I argue that as British intellectuals come in the first half of the twentieth century to define British thought as being by nature highly specialized and deeply skeptical, the sage, who interprets the whole of reality and imagines the world to possess a discernible, unitary meaning, increasingly comes to be seen as a foreign and, more specifically, Oriental figure. In my conclusion, I discuss Mohandas Gandhi’s *An Autobiography*, for Gandhi both serves for much of the West as the prototypical Oriental sage figure, and openly admits his intellectual debts to the Victorian sages Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. In the reviews of Gandhi’s autobiography, which was released in England in the early 1930s, we see the traits of the sage in general identified as specifically Oriental in nature, and the rhetoric of the sage accepted with an enthusiasm denied to the autobiographies of Wells and Chesterton. Gandhi’s autobiography also follows, and interestingly revises, the basic tropes of sage autobiography as I have defined them. With Mahatma Gandhi, the sage and sage autobiography move East, where, in the work of the Dalai Lama and other luminaries, it still survives. In one of the ironies of literary and intellectual history, the sage discourse and sage autobiography survive—albeit in a geographically displaced
form—precisely because of the very extent of the specialist’s cultural and
epistemological triumph over the sage.

1 See Peterson’s Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation, pgs. 3-4.
2 Similarly, Nicholas Everett notes that Whitman’s Specimen Days draws off of John Burrough’s Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person (1867, rev. 1871) and concludes that this constitutes “a reversal of the usual dealings between author and biographer,” but after this tantalizing remark offers no real analysis of the matter (223).
3 As Kierkegaard writes, “In the transitory relations of authority between persons qua human beings, authority will as a rule be physically recognizable by power. An apostle has no evidence other than his own statement, and at most his willingness to suffer everything joyfully for that statement” (347-48). “I am not to listen to Paul because he is brilliant or matchlessly brilliant [i.e., a genius], but I am to submit to Paul because he has divine authority; and in any case it must become Paul’s responsibility to see to it that he produces this impression, whether anyone submits to it or not” (Kierkegaard 341).
4 This is the subject of Chapter 5 of Landow’s Elegant Jeremiahs.
5 Since Carlyle’s early work is the subject of most Carlyle studies and Wells’s science fiction is the subject of most Wells studies, Carlyle’s written response to the reception of his controversial later works and Wells’s response to the reception of his often unsuccessful nonfiction prophetic works are matters not often studied. Chesterton studies are conducted primarily by the useful but uncritical Chesterton Review, a journal unlikely to investigate any damaging attacks on its subject.
6 While Christ does a thorough job proving that from the 1890s on the editors of literary anthologies had difficulty determining how to categorize the works of the sages, and so placed their writings in many varied discipline-based genres rather than together as a distinct subgenre, her analysis fails to account for or even address the large number of Victorian and Edwardian writers who did see the sages as participating in a common rhetorical project. For instance, many discontented Victorian intellectuals in the 1840s felt that they must choose between accepting the doctrine of Newman and that of Carlyle (though in discipline categories Newman wrote theology and Carlyle history); Wells complained about being dubbed a “second Carlyle” by his publisher; and Chesterton and Wells are discussed together in Slosson’s 1917 book Six Major Prophets (Wells Experiment 427). Thus, Christ’s analysis tells us more about the rise of twentieth-century professionalized literary culture and its disdain for the unprofessional sage project (a subject I shall discuss at some length in my Chesterton and Wells chapters) than about the place of (or lack of a distinct place for) the sage project within Victorian and Edwardian culture (23 ff).
7 On the Victorians’ identification of the sages as prophets, see, for example, Landow Elegant Jeremiahs, pg. 18 and Carlyle and Chesterton’s nicknames: “The Sage of Chelsea” and “The Sage of Beaconsfield.”
9 When discussing sages who write at a considerable remove from Newman and Carlyle, I turn to the Edwardians rather than the Romantics because no Romantic is a sage in George Landow’s sense of the term. As Landow notes, the oracular Romantic poets share many traits in common with the Victorian sages, but as the Romantics tend to posit a sympathetic implied audience they lack the sages’ distinctively confrontational audience relation (Elegant 29-30). Wordsworth’s use of his “Friend,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as the putative audience of the Prelude is a clear example of the rhetorical divide between the Romantics and the sages.
10 In reference to my claim that the Edwardian is the last period to contain a group of writers who fulfill Landow’s strict definition of the sage, I should note here that I am aware that Landow does not make this point explicitly, and seems even to contradict it. Landow posits a simple division between nineteenth-century sages, who entirely fulfill his definition of the sage, and twentieth century sages, who fulfill much but not all of his definition (Elegant 33). However, Landow, like so many critics, passes over the
Edwardian period and the major Edwardian authors without mention, and gives no example of the twentieth-century sage prior to D. H. Lawrence. Landow’s statements on the matter, then, do not contradict mine; the Edwardian period has simply escaped his notice. Many critics have come to accept the notion of a “long nineteenth century,” which stretches up until World War I, and, as I shall show in the pages that follow, this notion is meaningful in the context of the sages; there is no element of Landow’s definition that Chesterton and Wells—or, for that matter, Belloc and Shaw—do not fulfill. I exclude Belloc and Shaw from this study, however, as they wrote nothing that could conventionally be considered an autobiography.

Vague or eccentric definitions that mar otherwise valuable works include Danahay’s definition of autobiography as any text, whether fiction or nonfiction, that “reduces the social horizon to the interplay of a self and other” and Gagnier’s definition of autobiography as any literary “self-representation” (Danahay 13-14; Gagnier 5).

Cf. Machann’s assertion that Victorian literary autobiographies were generally read as “a key” to the author’s other works (160).

Carlyle, in fact, was a prominent Victorian agitator for tougher copyright laws.

See, for instance, Landow’s essay “Aggressive Reinterpretations,” pg. 40.

This passage causes Praeterita to be a favorite example for critics who, like Danahay, envision Victorian male autobiography as solipsistic and self-enclosed (cf. Danahay 199, 125; Gagnier 240, 247). For its depiction of a “confident male selfhood,” “the professional writer whose selfhood is confirmed and consolidated by its readership,” Swindells dubs Praeterita “the model autobiography of the nineteenth-century critical commentator and analyst” (34, cf. 35). As the autobiography of a sage figure, Praeterita is entirely unrepresentative, and the use of Ruskin’s work as a model or interpretive key for all similar works has led critics to misread the autobiographies of other sages.

Cf. Peterson “Harriet” 174; Thais Morgan 6-7.

If my conclusions with regard to the sage autobiography are received as valid, an analysis of the ways in which female sages displace the rhetorical concerns of the sage autobiography onto fictional autobiography or poetry could serve as insightful follow-up to this project and as a useful means of measuring to what extent my conclusions are gender and genre bound.

Clinton Machann in The Genre of Autobiography in Victorian Literature makes the same point in reference to Victorian autobiography, although he lacks my focus on intertextual disruptions of authority (24).

Interestingly, Freud’s autobiographical works History of the Psychoanalytic Movement and An Autobiographical Study correspond to the pattern I have been discussing. Freud depicts himself as shocked and traumatized by Jung and Adler’s desertion, and attempts to consolidate his authority by explaining this event in terms of psychoanalytic theory (History 7, 43-50, 52, 58, cf. Autobiographical 42-43, 150). The concept of “resistance” serves the invaluable function of allowing him to treat negative reception in terms of his system (Freud Autobiographical 50-53).

On the pre-Freudian origins of the connection between the modern and trauma, see Harrington’s essay “The Railway Accident: Trains, Trauma, and Technological Crisis in Nineteenth-Century Britain, pgs. 32-35 and Micale’s essay “Jean-Martin Charcot and les névroses traumatiques: From Medicine to Culture in French Trauma Theory of the Late Nineteenth Century,” pgs. 137-39. As Lerner and Micale succinctly observe, the “expansion of the trauma concept” from the physical to the psychological “was simultaneously responsive to and constitutive of ‘modernity’” (10). On Freud’s dependence on previous works on trauma, especially Charcot’s, see Micale, pgs. 128 and 134.

For an application of this concept to the sage discourse, see Thais Morgan’s essay “Victorian Sage Discourse and the Feminine,” pgs. 2-3.

For a psychological discussion of how individual trauma and an individual’s sense that the universe is meaningless are connected see Krystal, pg. 85.

The sage thus is somewhat analogous with what Leigh Gilmore has termed the “knowing subject,” a type of autobiographer who “models an engagement with what is difficult, compelling, intractable, and surprising. The knowing subject works with dissonant materials, fragmented by trauma, and organizes them into a form of knowledge” (147). However, Gilmore’s knowing subject, as the title of her work The Limits of Autobiography suggests, expresses the autobiographical impulse in a form that goes beyond the conventional “limits” of autobiography, and which consequently is usually considered fiction. Since the
rhetorical dilemma of the sage autobiography derives precisely from the conventional limits and requirements of autobiography as a genre (particularly from the referential pact), the sage and the knowing subject face considerably different rhetorical challenges in pursuing their common end, and consequently diverge more than converge in their approaches to autobiography.
CHAPTER 2

CARLYLE VERSUS THE DEVIL AND ALL MEN: WHY EVERYONE HATED THE

REMINISCENCES

I: Heroes and Stump Orators: Defining the Carlylean Prophet

Carlyle is the original and prototypical Victorian sage. As George Landow notes, Carlyle invents the sage discourse as a rhetorical form, and nearly all later contributors to the form are in some measure responding to his work (“Aggressive” 33). As the inventor of the combination of Romantic and Evangelical constructions of authority that was the Victorian sage, Carlyle was acutely aware of the rhetorical weak points of the sage position. Fittingly then, his Reminiscences more effectively identify the basic rhetorical issues and narrative problems that occur when a sage writes an autobiography than does any other work of its type. For this reason, though chronologically Newman’s Apologia (1864) narrowly precedes Carlyle’s Reminiscences (1866-67), Carlyle’s text has logical precedence, and will begin this study of sage autobiography.

Literarily, Carlyle’s Reminiscences are best known for wickedly funny character sketches of prominent persons, self-sympathetic asides, self-lacerating narratives, and a disastrous popular and critical reception. Carlyle’s hagiographical portrait of his “lost
Darling,” Jane Carlyle, elegiac depiction of his closest friend, “noble [Edward] Irvin[g],” and satirical rendering of his acquaintance, the “puffy, anxious, obstructed-looking fattish old man” known as Samuel Taylor Coleridge are among the work’s best known character sketches (Reminiscences 194, 347, 289). However, the work’s reception when it was published after Carlyle’s death in 1881 is so well known as to overshadow the text itself. The reception was sublimely bad, as popular anger at Carlyle as a mean-spirited and ungentlemanly satirist gradually turned to popular indignation at Carlyle as a bad husband and finally to popular mockery of Carlyle as an impotent husband. As Trev Broughton traces in some detail, Carlyle’s Reminiscences and J. A. Froude’s biography of Carlyle together wreaked irreparable damage on Carlyle’s literary reputation; honored as an aged sage in the 1870s, Carlyle was a figure of mockery by the turn of the century.

Although no critic has discussed it, the reception of the Reminiscences is strangely foreshadowed in the text itself. The mournful Reminiscences consistently depict Carlyle as a prophet without honor and without audience, an assessment of Carlyle’s post-Latter-Day-Pamphlets literary standing that critics, influenced by the work’s reception, have tended to take at face value. However, Carlyle actually wrote the Reminiscences at the height of his popularity. The critical focus on the text’s 1881 reception has perhaps obscured its 1866-1867 composition. When Carlyle began writing the Reminiscences, he had recently given his inaugural address as Rector of the University of Edinburgh, and that wildly popular and often reprinted speech had
triumphantly restored the literary reputation that the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* had damaged. Friends and foes alike agreed that Carlyle had never been more popular; further, it was his first taste of true mass popularity. If in the *Reminiscences* Carlyle portrays himself as a rejected, isolated, and embittered prophet, he does so in spite of scores of essays and newspaper articles to the contrary.

I contend that, considered in historical context, the problem of the *Reminiscences* is not disgrace but popularity. Carlyle wrote the *Reminiscences* as the Second Reform Bill was being debated in parliament, and wrote “Shooting Niagara,” his scathing attack on the Second Reform Bill, shortly after completing the first full draft of the work. The *Reminiscences* no less than “Shooting Niagara” are marked by Carlyle’s fear of a world where “Count of Heads” is the absolute arbiter of truth and falsity, a world where the economics of supply and demand rule ideas as surely as industry, the government as surely as the stock exchange (“Shooting Niagara” 299). The “dirty ‘reform-bill’” as Carlyle dubs it, is the “product of mere insanity,” and will usher in a mad world (*Reminiscences* 178). Carlyle particularly fears how the value of his own work will fare in such a world. The mass reader, who reads Carlyle’s works without comprehending them and is left amused but unconverted, hovers over the *Reminiscences*, triggering Carlyle’s fear that his oracles have no inherent value and are worth only what they will fetch in the marketplace.

Carlyle’s rejection in the *Reminiscences* of the public’s adulation of himself and his work—he lampoons both the laudatory popular biographies of himself and the Edinburgh address’s favorable reception—evidences the foundational issues involved in any sage attempting to write his life. As Carlyle’s case most clearly attests, the sage is
driven to autobiography following a traumatic literary reception that underscores his inability to control either biographical accounts of himself or reader response to his work. Carlyle’s hatred of the idea of anyone writing a biography of him was well known. He had theorized biography as an interpretive art, a reading of an individual’s work and existence in light of the meaning of the universe as a whole. He had also theorized his own position as a sage as that of the social outsider who alone can correctly interpret the meaning of the contemporary world, the lone Daniel who can discern the meaning of the writing on the wall. Given Carlyle’s insistence on the interpretive nature of both biography and the sage position, for anyone to write even the most admiring biography of Carlyle is for Carlyle to be dispossessed of his status as an all-interpreting sage, and to be reduced instead to being the object of someone else’s interpretations. Two popular biographies especially concern Carlyle as he is writing the *Reminiscences*: John Hotten and R. H. Shepherd’s work, which depicts Carlyle as a prototypical self-made man and an affable popular author, and Margaret Oliphant’s work, which depicts Carlyle as cut from the same cloth as his friend Edward Irving, a much-beloved popular preacher who late in his career led a proto-Pentecostal movement and died disgraced, amid rumors of madness. Both of these popular biographies cast Carlyle’s life in terms of the tropes and literary devices of the mass market fiction that Hotten published and Oliphant wrote, and thereby, despite their praise of Carlyle as an inspired genius, deprive him of his position as a singular voice of truth in a corrupt world. These biographies are the summation of Carlyle’s critical fears, as they interpret his life for a mass audience that views him as a mere popular author. The *Reminiscences*’ famous hostility towards both the literary world and the world at large is an attempt to distinguish Carlyle from the herd of popular
authors and to shed his mass audience. He seeks to give his work a stable value by
winnowing his readers down to a Calvinistic elect, an elite foreordained to read his work
and be transformed by it. The massive popular and critical failure of the *Reminiscences*
upon their 1881 release is thus an ironic success for Carlyle’s narrative strategy; he has
indeed jettisoned himself of all but the elect and restored his work to stable value, even if
that value approaches zero.

However, before I can proceed to discuss how the *Reminiscences* attempt to
contain the various threats popularity poses for Carlyle’s sage system, I must first define
what I mean by both Carlyle’s “*Reminiscences*” and “sage system.” The contents of the
*Reminiscences* vary in the work’s many different editions, a circumstance that requires
the critic to take a stand on which “reminiscences” constitute the work as well as on their
interpretation. In this chapter, I will consider the *Reminiscences* to consist of “Jane
Welsh Carlyle,” “Edward Irving,” “Francis Jeffrey,” and “Sundry,” the sections that
Carlyle wrote in rapid succession between May 1866 and March 1867 and that together
form a relatively complete narrative of his early career. These sections form a continuous
work in both subject matter and period of composition. The other pieces that have been
considered part of the *Reminiscences*—“James Carlyle,” “Christopher North,” and “Sir
William Hamilton”—were written at other times for other audiences and have been
connected to the *Reminiscences*’ principal sections only by posthumous editorial
decision; these pieces will, consequently, be omitted from my analysis.¹

As will be the case with each of the sages in this study, the threats to Carlyle’s
authority that the *Reminiscences* attempt to contain can be properly understood only if
one first understands his philosophical system. The particular weak points of the system
dictate the nature of the threat. As George Levine notes, Carlyle’s philosophy represents an essentially religious rebellion against the “rationalism and mechanism” of Victorian England (*Boundaries* 177, cf. Holloway 23). In an age increasingly dominated by a sense that only empirical facts are reliable and transcendent truth is unattainable, Carlyle restores the idea of transcendent truth by redefining the nature of fact and reinstating the importance of interpretation. For Carlyle, since human existence is “solid,” a vast interrelated system in which every action somehow causes every other action and no action is unimportant, human existence transcends rational understanding and cannot be understood in terms of the simple/cause effect relations suggested by empirical analysis (Childers 248). For Carlyle as a philosopher and historian, no aspect of human existence can be meaningfully considered in isolation from the rest of human existence. Perhaps most interestingly, the observer cannot be separated from the phenomenon observed, the interpreter from the thing interpreted; hence, for Carlyle, the account of an engaged participant in an event is more honest than the account of a dispassionate observer, and the meaning of history is half-created by the historian (Hirsch 229). For example, Carlyle considers the “Dryasdust” materialist historians who attempt to fit history into a logical sequence determined by material laws to be themselves terribly subjective, merely “projecting the spiritual sterility of their own era back on the past” (Jann 15).

While Carlyle’s critique of the subjectivity of Victorian objectivity may sound persuasive, especially to postmodern ears, this critique both undergirds and threatens Carlyle’s whole system; it undermines utilitarianism and scientific rationalism, but borders on a Romantic subjectivism that undermines all attempts to discern the nature of reality, including Carlyle’s sage system. Carlyle’s famous hatred of fiction is derived
from his fear that the subjectivity of human understanding and imagination could mean that humanity does not actually see or understand reality at all. Carlyle’s writings are haunted by this possibility, by nightmarish word-pictures of solipsists who have an “Image of their own pitiful Self . . . forever painted in the retina,” and consequently view the universe as an “expanded magic-lantern show of that same Image” (“Biography” 19).

Carlyle turns to history, and especially biography, to question Victorian rationalism without falling into the Romantic solipsism that his thought in many ways resembles. For Carlyle, the past is both materially real and often illogical, and thus neither Utilitarian rationalism nor Romantic imaginings can eradicate it (cf. Carlyle Past 240, Levine Boundaries 58). “The smallest historical fact” is more “impressive” than the “grandest fictitious event,” as the former helps us resist the Romantic temptation to become trapped in our own psyches and blind to the external world (“Biography” 13 emphasis Carlyle’s). Carlyle suggests that although we apprehend history subjectively, external events and persons do exist to subjectively apprehend, and the interpreter’s interaction with them can result in a legitimate, truth-producing dialogue, so long as this dialogue is not thwarted by a false pretense of objectivity (Childers 251, 254). The most important function of the Carlylean fact is to defeat empiricism on its own terms, to offer a materially-embodied example for which materialist philosophy cannot account. As Carlyle says, the “man of Theory”’s “logic arrow” bounces off historical “fact” as off “a scaly dragon”; as Landow says, much of the sage’s authority comes from his ability to interpret events that others cannot explain (Past 161, Landow Elegant 76-77).

Carlyle’s historical philosophy also results in his famous redefinition of history as biography, his claim that “History is the essence of innumerable Biographies”
“(Biography” 4). Consistent with his general approach to history, Carlyle posits that the seemingly objective record of history disintegrates into an “inane grey haze” unless it is unified and given meaning by being connected to the subjective experience of the individual (Past and Present 54-55). Carlylean biography posits that the facts of an individual’s life, when properly interpreted, reveal the meaning and nature of the actual universe. Carlyle’s religious philosophy approached pantheism, and held that the interconnectedness of all things causes each occurrence and life to have divine meaning; each particular is a part of and in a way alters the divine whole. The knowledge that something “did actually occur” makes it “part of the system of the All for me” and thereby alters my reality (Carlyle “Biography” 13). By the same token, Carlyle insists that no individual life, no matter how apparently meaningless, brief, tragic, or vapid, is, when rightly understood, devoid of metaphysical weight. “There is no biography of a man . . . but wraps in it a message out of heaven addressed to the hearing ear” (Latter-Day Pamphlets 466). Even a “foolish,” “mean” or “ugly” life, “if real and well presented, will fix itself in a susceptive memory and lie ennobled there; silvered over . . . with the pathos which belongs only to the Dead” (“Biography” 18). There is “No Head” “so wooden” that it could not be to “other heads . . . a genius and Friar Bacon’s Oracle” (“Biography” 6). The author of such a biography as Carlyle imagines, a biography that reveals the nature of the universe, must be, to use John Holloway’s term, a “Prophet-Historian,” one whose histories endeavor to “teac[h] men their own nature and how they should live” (58). Carlyle’s position in works such as Heroes and Hero-Worship as the biographer of inspired heroes gives him in the terms of his system a tremendous amount of authority; he is the interpreter of the interpreters of reality.
The Carlylean prophet or hero is a solitary figure who can look beneath the appearance of facts, which are generally mere phenomena and phantasm, and see the true facts, the fundamental realities that structure the universe (cf. *Past* 127, 140). Beneath a seemingly meaningless and inorganic age, the prophet sees a “deeper, fundamental,” even “organic” structure (Ulrich 2). As Landow suggests, Carlylean facts are often most clearly evidenced in the blind spots of conventional society and rationalist analysis, at social extremes and in grotesque phenomena—the typhus widow who proves her humanity by spreading her disease, the Champion of England who is incapable of climbing a horse, the Seven-Foot-Hat that walks the streets of London and whose maker knows that “The Quack has become God” (Carlyle *Past* 143, 144, 151; cf. Landow *Elegant* 76-77). The truths that all people are brothers and that England is internally decaying because it has denied this brotherhood are visible, but only to a marginal figure like the sage, one who looks where others do not look, sees what others do not see, and interprets in a manner in which others do not interpret, typologically reading material phenomena as divine signs. The sage looks beyond the phantasms, the phenomena that do not manifest the “cosmic spiritual life” of the universe, and judges them in light of the facts that do manifest this life (cf. Holloway 23). The world contains God’s truth, but since this truth can be deduced through neither the mechanical principles of Victorian empirical science nor the dismal science of economics, and is not expressible in propositional terms, most people miss it, and God’s truth remains an “open secret” read by the sage alone (Carlyle “The Present Time” 15, Helmling 26, cf. Holloway 22).

The Carlylean sage or hero, who has an unquantifiable and nearly mystical ability to understand a fundamentally incomprehensible reality, is Carlyle’s solution to the
apparent meaninglessness of a mechanized and scientific age. The hero is one who intuitively possesses “an imperfect glimpse of some basic puzzling truth” and also possesses the courage to existentially act on this insight without demanding scientific proof; the hero is a passionate participant in rather than an objective observer of reality (Holloway 22). Like the oracle of an Old Testament prophet or the sacraments of the Catholic Church, the sage’s prophetic word is a sign that always effects that which it signifies (cf. Carlyle, “Inaugural” 166; Chandler 143-44). Since for Carlyle truth is known through subjective observation and action, the sage’s entire character as a human subject authorizes his message. The sage’s word possesses the inherent value that all human speech should possess; it is a “banknote for an inward capital of culture, of insight and noble human worth” redeemable for inner gold (“Stump-Orator” 152). One might even say that the hero is Carlyle’s philosophy and message, that the idea of the sage is his sage philosophy. As John Holloway notes, Carlyle’s basic philosophical ideas are “simple” and do not amount to much as a “system” (4, 23). Carlyle’s message is that there are prophets who understand the suprarational universe and shape it by their words and actions, and that the universe therefore is not just a meaningless mass of material facts or the consensus opinion of a mob of self-interested individuals (cf. “Parliaments” 202).

The problem of audience is the greatest potential threat to the authority of the Carlylean prophet, and therefore to Carlyle’s whole philosophy. The Carlylean prophet knows the truth, but, opposed to empiricism and formal logic, he cannot prove it any objective way. Unlike the biblical prophets, the Carlylean prophet cannot produce a miracle to force the crowd to accept his authority; unlike the consecrated priest, the
Carlylean prophet possesses no establishment credentials to compel assent. If the
prophet’s message is to have inherent value, its value cannot depend on its audience, but
if the prophet’s message is to change the world, it must have an audience. The flip side
to Carlyle’s obsession with heroes is his obsession with quacks, and the quack differs
from the hero primarily in that the value of his proclamations is entirely derived from its
appeal to the audience. The quack is a Carlylean nightmare, a false prophet whose word
is validated neither by his own internal worth nor by his insight into external reality, but
merely by his ability to supply the type of speech the crowd demands. Carlyle fears that
in an increasingly democratic Britain free trade and supply and demand will soon
determine value “not in shop-goods only, but in all things temporal, spiritual and eternal,”
that “Count of Heads” rather than truth or reality will be “the Divine Court of Appeal on
every question and interest of mankind” (“Shooting Niagara” 299, 300). The quack—or,
as he is called in his political or literary manifestation, the “Stump Orator”—is the god of
this age to come. He rules the age (or the age rules him) especially through the
overlapping worlds of parliament and mass literature (cf. “Shooting Niagara” 320).
Carlyle finds the Stump Orator particularly in “Avuncular Parliaments and Penny
Newspapers,” in the politicians who rule by pandering to the deluded masses and in the
newspapers who cover the parliaments’ proceedings while pandering to the same
audience (“Shooting Niagara” 335, 337). Neither public intellectual forum has any
concern with truth, but merely with popular opinion. Parliament is a “National Palaver
recognized as Sovereign, a solemn Convocation of all the Stump Orators in the Nation to
come and govern us” and “Divine Popular Literature” is a series of falsely consoling
dreams that are leading the nation down the “broad way that leadeth to destruction,” into inaction and unreality (“Stump-Orator” 148, 163; “Parliaments” 187-88).

As the quack is a false prophet who compiles his false visions into a false literature, the quack’s speech is also the antithesis of the sage’s speech. While the sage’s speech is a valid intellectual banknote with an inherent, fixed value, the speech of the Stump Orator, who speaks well but lacks “inward capital,” is a “forged” banknote that “pass[es] freely current in the market; but bring[s] damages to the receiver, the payer, and to all the world” (“Stump-Orator” 152). If the sage reveals the nature of the universe and in some manner speaks for God, the Stump Orator is “a mouthpiece of Chaos to poor benighted mortals that lend ear to him as a voice from Cosmos” (“Stump-Orator” 149). The quack’s speech displaces the Real with the sign of the Real, and threatens to replace reality with a simulacrum (Ulrich 10). Since the quack is merely the voice of the crowd, he need not have any great ability or remarkable gifts; the hero is an extraordinary individual, but anyone can be a quack. As Carlyle writes, the human mob or “swarm” must always have

some big Queen Bee . . . in the centre of the swarm; but any commonplace stupidest bee . . . if he can happen, by noise or otherwise, to get chosen for the function, will straightway get fatted and inflated into bulk, which of itself means complete capacity; no difficulty about finding your Queen Bee . . . and the swarm once formed, finds itself impelled to action, as one with heart and mind. (“Shooting Niagara” 301)

The quack’s speech is the antithesis of the sage’s speech in all respects except, disturbingly, one: the quack has an audience, and his speech impels it to act. As Lamb notes, the Stump Orator is “the lord of misrule” in a heterotopia of false speech (Lamb 11-12, cf. “Shooting Niagara” 300).
In the 1850s and 1860s, Carlyle came to consider Benjamin Disraeli, parliamentary leader and popular author, to be the “Stump Orator” incarnate (cf. “To John Carlyle” 51-52). Disraeli was distrusted and disliked by his own party, which nonetheless looked to him for leadership, since no other Tory could compete with Gladstone in parliamentary oratory and debate. As a man of purportedly questionable integrity risen to power simply because of his ability to talk persuasively, Disraeli struck Carlyle as the embodiment of his idea of the Stump Orator. Just as a quack has pretensions to the status of the prophet, so Disraeli possessed aspirations to Carlyle’s voice and literary authority. As his biographers note, Disraeli aspired to the status of the “Carlylean seer” and preached a vision for Britain that was superficially similar to Carlyle’s—an organic society freed from laissez-faire economics and ruled by a wise and kindly aristocracy consisting of “the best men of all classes” (Paul Smith 65; Jenkins 143; Holloway 88; Disraeli Sybil 64-65, 163, 181, “Borough Franchise” 543). Disraeli, however, posits a relation between author and audience, between leader and follower, that greatly differs from Carlyle’s. For Disraeli, the leader’s role is to help the people “see their own” vision, not to “impose his own vision—that is for demagogues”; since the leader’s role is to reflect and refine the people’s vision, the leader’s message naturally changes as the “spirit of the time” (and the spirit of the average voter) alters (Matthews 186, Disraeli “Third Reading” 611, 613; cf. Disraeli Sybil 398). The Disraelian leader—who openly shapes his vision to fit his audience—is thus the Carlylean quack, and the Disraelian demagogue—who compels an audience to accept his original and unconventional views—is the Carlylean hero. Carlyle comes close to making this point himself—albeit in much harsher terms—in his verbal caricature of Disraeli as a hired
“tongue” who makes a living “put[ting] words in” the “mouth” of “whatever brutish
Infatuation has money in its purse, votes in its pocket and no tongue in its head” (“To
Jean Carlyle Aitken” 374).

For Carlyle, the rise of such a quack as Disraeli to a position of leadership in the
House of Commons is a sign of nearly apocalyptic proportions, signaling the final
downfall of England as an organic society. Disraeli first rose to political prominence by
convincing the Tory Party to disown its leader, Sir Robert Peel, because of his
sponsorship of the repeal of the Corn Laws; Carlyle considered Disraeli’s rise and Peel’s
fall to be the opening of a new “epoch” in English history (Carlyle “To John Childs” 123,
cf. Jenkins 27). Sir Robert Peel was Carlyle’s last hope of finding a true hero in British
political life—Carlyle hoped he would prove a Hercules capable of cleaning the “stables”
of the British Parliament—and this hero was deprived of power by the consummate
Stump Orator (cf. “Downing Street” 78, 83). As the leader of the Tory party in the House
of Commons, Disraeli is, Carlyle asserts, the “Talking King” of England, and his position
represents the “highest” “triumph” of “the Art of wagging the tongue” yet seen in the
realm (“To Lady Ashburton” 54, “To John Childs” 123). Carlyle loathed the Second
Reform Bill, positing that, since the masses are almost always deluded and mistaken, to
enfranchise a significant proportion of the masses is to create a government that cannot
but prefer fantasy to reality, popularity to truth (cf. “Shooting Niagara” 299-300, 306).
As the quack is embodiment of mob opinion, it gives Carlyle “a kind of secret
satisfaction, of the malicious or even of the judiciary kind” that, of all politicians,
“Dizzy,” the “superlative Hebrew conjurer,” should be the chief author and supporter of
the Second Reform Bill ("Shooting Niagara" 307). In a theme the *Reminiscences* will take up, the quack begets a new world of quackery.

Though Carlyle was always confident of his ability to identify such quacks as Disraeli, he realized that his system provides few objective criteria for distinguishing the hero from the quack, even himself from Disraeli. Both the hero and the quack have a vision for the nation, an internally consistent intellectual system, and devoted followers. And although the hero speaks from legitimate inner conviction and the quack speaks to please the crowd, this difference is a question of interior motive and can be difficult for the observer to determine. Carlyle has described the word of the hero as a “bank note” redeemable for inner gold, but, as Chris Vanden Bossche notes, in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe bills first ceased to be redeemable for a fixed amount of gold; money ceased to have meaning through a hierarchical relation to a fixed point outside of itself—the King’s treasury—and became a “self-enclosed syst[e][m]” devoid of fixed values (7). At approximately the same time, the end of the patronage system and rise of market dominance brought about an analogous transformation in literature; no longer authorized by its relation to the hierarchy, literature comes to have value in reference to no fixed point outside of the fluctuating relations of supply and demand (Vanden Bossche 8). As Carlyle is aware, his currency metaphor for the speech of the sage is deeply problematic; in an age of paper currency, the metaphor implicitly emphasizes current literature’s lack of a fixed meaning and the difficulty of determining the validity of a purported sage’s claims. As Carlyle mourns, again employing a currency metaphor, “really excellent speech . . . is terribly apt to get confounded with its *counterfeit*, sham-excellent speech” and the false speech of the quack is accepted as
legitimate throughout the realm ("Stump-Orator" 147-48, emphasis mine). In speech as in economics, in the era of paper money, value is unstable and false currency difficult to detect. Carlyle fears that it is the doom of a self-interested and servile age like the present to “take the quack for a hero” (Past 86). These concerns of Carlyle’s are embodied in a surprisingly literal manner in a well-received series of essays published anonymously in the London Times in January 1838. The essays, titled “Old England” and signed “Coeur de Lion,” were written by Disraeli but, Carlyle complained, they were “extravagantly in my manner; so that several friends actually thought it was I” (qtd. in Weintraub 178). For Carlyle’s system of heroes and hero-worship to mean anything, there must be some way to distinguish accurately between the writing of a prophet and that of a quack, between Disraeli’s and his own, but this sign appears to be lacking.

Carlyle’s theorizations of the relation between the prophet and his audience comprise an attempt both to set a fixed value for the sage’s work and to set a definitive boundary between the sage and the quack. Carlyle posits two basic theories of audience, each of which creates a set audience whose opinions about his work do not fluctuate. His first, and most Romantic, impulse is to idealize apathy towards the reception a work receives from both its voluntary readers and its professional readers, the reviewers. Carlyle suggests that if the author in the process of composition ignores the audience, when a work passes into circulation its apparent value may fluctuate, but its true value will be fixed. The writer of a legitimate bank note knows its value, and cares not whether the recipient cashes it; only the forger is desperately anxious for his note quickly to change hands. If the quack writes with only audience reception in mind, the hero will ignore his reception altogether. The true author, essentially, is his own audience. As
Carlyle writes of the man of action in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, “if he cannot dispense with the world’s suffrage and make his own suffrage serve, he is a poor eye-servant; the work committed to him will be *misdone*” (156, emphasis Carlyle’s). The prophetic work is produced to relieve the prophet’s conscience, to extinguish the fire burning in his belly, and the public response, positive or negative, simply does not matter. As Carlyle recalls remarking to Jane just after completing the *French Revolution*, “What they will do with this Book, none knows . . . but they have not had, for a two hundred years, any Book that came more truly from a man’s very heart; and so let them trample it under foot and hoof as they see best!” (*Reminiscences* 94, emphasis Carlyle’s).

Linda Austin in *The Practical Ruskin* suggests that the late Ruskin’s hoarding of coins and overpricing of his books are both part of an obsessive, if impossible, quest to fix value in a capitalist society (see 164-80). Carlyle, at once more cynical and more idealistic, insists that the value of a book is established before it leaves its author’s hands, and that all that happens thereafter, whether positive or negative, is simply a vast and fraudulent phantasmagoria. He frankly establishes the legitimacy of his work as an author in his “Petition on the Copyright Bill” on the grounds that he wrote his books without “any encouragement or countenance in writing of said books, or . . . discern[ing] any chance of receiving such; but wrote them by efforts of his own and the favor of Heaven” (340).

During his period as a literary lion, Carlyle came to fear positive reception. The anticipated positive reception of a work was a potential threat to his model of the author as the only true audience of a work. If Carlyle, voluntarily or involuntarily, considered the possibility of public praise while writing, the work would become corrupted at its
point of origin. If the work’s value to the author depends on his hope of a positive reception, the work’s value still derives from the vagaries of the market, and is not inherent or fixed; the prophet has become a Stump Orator. As Carlyle complained to John Sterling, the first reviewer to write a book-length work in his praise, “I do not thank you; for I know not whether such things are good, nay whether they are not bad and a poison to one” (qtd. in Critical Heritage 403).

While Carlyle never entirely renounces his ideal of the author as the sole true audience of literature, as his career goes on repeated literary successes render him increasingly unable to ignore that he possesses—and even requires—an external audience. As I have shown, Carlyle realizes that for a book to change the world someone must appreciatively read it; the hero needs a hero-worshipper.² The very review by John Sterling that Carlyle fears may corrupt him he also considers one of the first signs that his “poor battle in the world is not quite a mad and futile” and may “come to something” (Life of Sterling 184). Carlyle accounts for his external audience by means of a second theory of audience, the audience as the elect. Unlike the popular author Carlyle imagines in “Stump-Orator,” whose fluctuating value is determined by a fickle mass audience, the true sage possesses a loyal audience of disciples, whose own worth is determined by their reaction to the sage’s writing.³ The distinction is best expressed by David Masson, a prominent Victorian critic and younger admirer of Carlyle’s. Masson argues with reference to Carlyle that for the “teacher, or agent of great social changes,” “popularity” is not an inherent “reward” except insofar as it shows how many he has “moved in the direction of his own spirit, and how much remains to be invaded and brought into subjection” (Masson 340). In a very similar vein, Carlyle writes in the Latter-Day
Pamphlets that the principal way that “present Reader canst” help save England from its current evils is by being “a man able to be governed,” by finding a hero and following him without reservation (“Downing Street” 89).

Drawing on biblical and Reformation-era models, Carlyle imagines the size of the prophet’s true band of disciples to be both numerically small (“the Noble Few”) and divinely predetermined (the “chosen of the world” or, slightly more subtly, “the Aristocracy of Nature”) (“Shooting Niagara” 316, 318, 336, cf. Past and Present 42). He pictures his work reaching its few appreciative readers as the Gospel reaches Calvin’s elect; a scandal to the masses, the Gospel redeems the elect, and both masses and elect are transformed by the encounter. The damnation of the masses is ratified by their very failure to respond; the lives of the elect enter glory. As in the Calvinist image that Carlyle employs as metaphor, the number of the elect is set before time begins, the model of the true audience as the elect also fixes the value of the work by fixing the real demand for it (though the apparent demand may fluctuate wildly). As Carlyle remarks in his Edinburgh address, “many people” are “hard and indifferent” to one, but this is acceptable because of the support of “noble hearts” whose approval is “precious . . . beyond price”; in both cases, positive or negative reception, one receives only that which “is appointed”; all true hearts are “as if conscript” (“Inaugural” 170, “To A. Robertson” 172).

Carlyle’s two models of audience are not entirely reconcilable and at times they conflict, but both use failure and opposition to fix the value of a work. Whereas Ruskin attempted to fix value by limiting supply, Carlyle attempts to fix value by limiting demand. This common end and common means allow Carlyle to employ his differing
models of audience simultaneously, and without any sense of contradiction. In the passage concerning *The French Revolution* quoted above, Carlyle both asserts that the work’s value derives solely from his feeling about it and that the work’s value is affirmed by the universal public rejection he anticipates. In the “Petition on the Copyright Bill,” he asserts “That this his labour has found hitherto, in money or money’s worth, small recompense or none; that he is by no means sure of its ever finding recompense” (341). Here the legitimacy of Carlyle’s labor is assumed if his audience (and therefore sales and revenue) has been either “small” (the elect model) or simply “none” (the author-as-audience model). The “Nigger Question,” while not discussing authorship, emphatically collapses the categories of audience Carlyle values. “Minority, I know,” Carlyle writes, “there always was: but there are degrees of it, down to minority of one,—down to suppression of the unfortunate minority, and reducing it to zero, that the Flunky world may have peace from it henceforth” (313-14). Audiences of a remnant, one, and zero are all valued; only the approbation of the flunky world threatens—through its fickleness, fluctuation, and general unreliability—an author’s work and value. 5 If, as “Shooting Niagara” posits, “To recognize merit, you must first yourself have it,” a work’s rejection by the reprobate, valueless masses can serve as a sign of its prophetic merit (“Shooting Niagara” 331, cf. “Parliaments” 206). As Carlyle grimly asserts in “Stump-Orator,” the “market-demand” for the kind of hero he valorizes is “nil” (161, emphasis Carlyle’s). The objective sign by which the prophet can be distinguished from the quack is that the masses do not like him.
II: Occasional Discourses: The Joys of Failure, the Problems of Popularity

Carlyle’s later career is the story of a series of increasingly desperate attempts to fix the value of his life and work, of which the Latter-Day Pamphlets were in his own eyes the most successful. In both the Reminiscences and in his letters, Carlyle treats the much-reviled Latter-Day Pamphlets as the crowning work of his career. As Carlyle sees it, these pamphlets, precisely by being universally hated, consolidated his prophetic authority. They protected him from mere popularity; they sorted out which members of his audience actually belonged to the elect and which did not; they were a kind of a series of Gideon tests for the army of God, winnowing his followers down to a small cordon who could enact meaningful change. In the Pamphlets Carlyle repeatedly announces his intention to stir up “offense and alarm,” and he received exactly the response he requested (Latter-Day Pamphlets 369-70). In “Jesuitism,” the final Latter-Day Pamphlet, Carlyle explicitly identifies the true audience for the work, the “one in a thousand” readers who now “see at all . . . what I see and have long seen” (“Jesuitism” 251). A figure approaching one in a thousand readers did enjoy the pamphlet, and these few devotees were as loyal as Carlyle could desire. In a similar spirit, Carlyle rejoiced over his defeat in the 1854 rectorial election for the University of Glasgow, declaring that the majority never decides rightly in any election, and that he is grateful that the only students who have “any real right to vote” (the intelligent, the knowledgeable, the elect) chose him (“To John Nichol” 217-18).

The pamphlet that most explicitly enacts the aims of the Latter-Day Pamphlets is Carlyle’s “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question,” which was published independently shortly before the rest of the series. Carlyle’s “Occasional Discourse”
purports to be a transcript of an unnamed speaker’s speech before the “Universal
Abolition-of-Pain Association” (304). In keeping with Carlyle’s theory of the author as
audience, this speaker, from the outset, is declared to be a “‘minority of one’ in the
present era of the world!” and to speak only because his conscience compels him to
perform this “painful duty” (“Occasional Discourse” 303). Living up to this description,
the speaker soon warns the audience that his speech will in no way consider their desires
or expectations—“You shall hear what I have to say . . . and probably you will not in the
least like it”—and castigates the folly of those who “fin[d] the secret of this Universe in
‘supply and demand,’” who determine value based on mass desire (Carlyle “Occasional
Discourse” 304, 308). As the speaker condemns emancipation and supply-and-demand
morality in favor of oligarchy and eternal law (Carlyle “Occasional Discourse” 305 ff.),
the audience becomes angrier and angrier. About a fifth of the way through the speech,
“various persons, in an agitated manner, with an air of indignation, le[ave] the room”
(Carlyle “Occasional Discourse” 309). Not long thereafter, there are “more withdrawals”
(Carlyle “Occasional Discourse” 311). However, a “small remnant of the audience”—the
elect—remains to hear the end of the address. The address transforms this faithful
remnant, who pass from skepticism regarding the speaker’s remarks, to listening in “deep
silence” (Carlyle “Occasional Discourse” 319), to giving “some assent” (Carlyle
“Occasional Discourse” 330). The discourse has driven off the reprobate and has
converted the elect.

While the reviewers spent the early 1850s worrying about his “fast sinking”
literary reputation, Carlyle, as David Masson alone realized, had received precisely the
reception his philosophy required (Masson 337-40, cf. Rev. of *Latter-Day Pamphlets*
In the Reminiscences, Carlyle praises the Latter-Day Pamphlets precisely because, by ruining his reputation, they reestablished his alienation from his readership and his legitimacy as an isolated prophet writing to please only his own soul. As Carlyle writes, the Latter-Day Pamphlets “unpleasantly astonished everybody . . . ruined my ‘reputation’ (according to the friendliest voices) and, in effect, divided me altogether from the mob of ‘Progress-of-the-Species’ and other vulgar,—but were a great relief to my own conscience as a faithful citizen, and have been ever since” (103, emphasis mine).

In Carlyle’s later works, his desire to retain a fixed value for his work often takes a less sanguine form, however, and at times he insists that the only sure way for the prophet to retain his authority is to refuse to publish anything at all. As Carlyle observes, the “true prophe[t] and see[r]” must speak publicly “to deliver the world from its Swarmeries” (“Shooting Niagara” 318), but “The idea you have once spoken . . . is no longer yours; it is gone from you . . . and the vital circulations of your self and your destiny and activity are deprived of it” (“Stump-Orator” 180). Since the majority of the audience will not accept the prophet’s message, and the prophet loses inner gold every time he speaks, in publishing or publicly uttering his thoughts, Carlyle sometimes suggests, the prophet almost always runs a loss (cf. “Stump-Orator” 148). Carlyle particularly comes to hate public speaking, in which an author directly faces an audience whom he cannot entirely control and whose spontaneous responses (such as cheers and hisses) could influence his own utterances (cf. “Stump-Orator” 147-48, Reminiscences 97). At approximately the same time as the composition of the Reminiscences, he suggests that true literary prophets—the “speaking or vocal” branch of the “Aristocracy of Nature”—might not “be disposed to speak their message to such an audience as there
[now] is” (“Shooting Niagara” 318). Soon, Carlyle claims, “for any Noble-man or useful person it will be a credit rather to declare,” I never tried Literature; believe me, I have not written anything” (“Shooting Niagara” 320, cf. Edinburgh 170). In “Shooting Niagara,” Carlyle goes so far as to claim that, in preference to viewing and facing the British public as it now is, he “would rather die” (337).

Carlyle is particularly convinced that if he is to maintain his prophetic authority, he must avoid portrayal in two literary genres: biography and autobiography. Carlyle’s detestation of the idea of his life ever being written, by himself or anyone else, runs throughout his work and his comments to contemporaries. His response to Geraldine Jewsbury’s memoir of Jane Carlyle forcibly summarizes his position: “No need that an idle gazing world should know of my lost Darling’s History or mine;—nor will they ever, they may depend on it! One fit service, and one only, they can do to her or to me: cease speaking of us, through all Eternity, as soon as they conveniently can” (Reminiscences 66, emphasis Carlyle’s). Both Carlyle’s fear of the mass audience (the “idle, gazing world”) and his theory of biography demand that his own life story be withheld from public consumption, if at all possible. As I have already implied, Carlyle’s theory of biography privileges the biographer at the expense of the biographical subject. For Carlyle, the biographical subject’s life takes on meaning only if it is “well presented” (“Biography” 18); counter to more naïve theories of biography, Carlyle suggests that it is the biographer’s skill, rather than the biographical data, that gives us the consolation of seeing meaning in each individual life. For this reason, he considers the value of a biography to be in no way tied to the relative value of its subject. A great biography could just as easily have a “wooden-headed,” “foolish,” “mean,” or “ugly” man as a
Great Man for its subject, for the biography’s meaning and authority derive solely from biographer’s interpretive prowess. As his opposition of the “life” (“a documentary compilation of a craftsman”) and the “biography” (“an interpretive creation of the artist”) suggests, vigorous—even transcedental—interpretation is for Carlyle the distinguishing hallmark of biography as a genre (Skabarnicki 16). The biographical subject is little more than interpretive fodder for the biographer.

Carlyle’s comments in and about his biography of his friend John Sterling best summarize his awareness of the objectifying tendencies of biography. Sterling was a minor writer who never produced a significant work, never formulated a coherent philosophy, and died in early middle age. As the Reminiscences relate, when it became known that Carlyle was writing on Sterling, some friends “urged disdainfully, ‘What has Sterling done that he should have a *Life*?’” (150). Jane Carlyle’s caustic reply, which Carlyle relates with approbation, is telling—“‘Induced Carlyle somehow to write him one!’” (Reminiscences 150). Sterling’s life, Jane implies, is of precisely no importance; significance resides only in Carlyle’s writing. The early pages of the Sterling biography discuss the dark side of this narrative dynamic more explicitly. While complaining that Archdeacon Hare’s deceptive biography of Sterling has forced him to write this book, Carlyle mourns the loss of authority that inevitably befalls the biographical subject. “How happy it comparatively is, for a man of any earnestness of life, to have no Biography written of him; but to return silently, with his small, sorely foiled bit of work, to the Supreme Silences, who can alone judge it or him; and not trouble the reviewers, and greater or lesser public with attempting to judge it” (Carlyle, *Sterling* 6). To escape becoming the subject of biography is to retain one’s self-interpretation and self-mastery;
to become the subject of a biography is to be handed over to the biographer, the public, and the reviewers, to be interpreted and objectified as they see fit. In his fear of becoming a biographical subject, Carlyle identifies a central problem that all sage autobiographies try to address. Since lived experience is the basis of the sage’s claim to interpretive authority, for anyone to offer any interpretation, whether positive or negative, of any significant event in the sage’s life is for the sage’s authority to be compromised. Carlyle’s fear of biography, it should be clear, is the flip side of his reverence for the genre, and contains also an implicit fear of autobiography. While the autobiographer may retain interpretive control over his life throughout the book’s composition, once the work is published, he still cedes interpretive control to the reviewers and general public, who will (mis)read the book however they wish.

Carlyle nears the end of 1865, the year before the Reminiscences, with his authority, on his own terms, essentially intact. His audience has neither risen nor declined dramatically since the Latter-Day Pamphlets, and he is both respected and resented as an iconoclastic scourge of British society. His followers are a devoted minority, a sort of prototype for Wells and his Open Conspiracy, and he has just finished what he plans to be his last major work, Frederick the Great. Since his major works are complete, there is no reason to think this situation will change dramatically for the rest of his life. In the fall, Carlyle is asked to run as the Liberal candidate for rector at a Scottish university for a second time. This time the college is his own University of Edinburgh. The rector theoretically represents the students to the head of the college, but usually this job is done by proxy and the rector’s main responsibility is to give a few public addresses. Since the Tory candidate for rector is Disraeli, and the idea of Disraeli, the
Prince of Quacks, symbolically leading his own alma mater appalls him, he accepts the nomination, though he had declined it in 1862 (Weintraub 413, Fielding and Henderson 3). The election proves to be a raucous one. Disraeli’s supporters make Carlyle’s disbelief in Christianity an issue against him, and argue that his hatred of orators and of public speaking prove that he will give a horrible rectorial address (Fielding and Henderson 6-8). Carlyle is a native son and popular hero, though, and in rowdy elections on November eleventh, marked by mock battles and elaborate pranks between the students, he beats Disraeli by a two-to-one margin, 657 to 310 (Fielding and Henderson 9-10). In an important symbolic victory, the author of Heroes crushes the consummate Stump Orator.

This victory, however, threatens to trigger a crisis in Carlyle’s authority. He has beaten Disraeli, but only by beating him at his own game—a popular election. Since Carlyle has declared that the majority of all classes and types of people are invariably wrong about everything, his victory suggests that his own claims to authority may be a fraud, and that his own worth may be determined by supply and demand. His previous rectorial defeat in Glasgow much better fit his model of authority, as he was supported by a loyal remnant but not the majority. Now that he has won the election, Carlyle must approach the domain of the Stump Orator even more closely: in the spring of 1866, for the first time in twenty-five years, he must give a public speech.

Prior to the event, Jane and Thomas Carlyle obsessively envision the Edinburgh address. In each of their visions, the address reaffirms Carlyle’s authority and model of the author-audience relation by literally enacting his model of prophetic speech. At the very minimum, like the speech in his “Occasional Discourse,” the address will be a
failure in reception. As Jane writes to Anna Welsh, “I am afraid, and he [Carlyle] himself is certain, his address will be a sad break-down to human expectation.” (“To Anna Welsh,” v. 2 285). At times, Carlyle goes further, and imagines that the attempt to give the address will render him both mute and rejected. He fears that once he takes the stage “speaking would be impossible; that [he] should utterly break down” (Reminiscences 189). In this fantasy, Carlyle, compulsively heeding his own call for prophetic silence, simply cannot speak in public; his thoughts withhold themselves from the public and his ideas refuse to be circulated. In the Carlyles’ third and final fantasy of disaster, Carlyle behaves consistently with the vision he will shortly offer in “Shooting Niagara” and dies rather than address the current audience. Jane Carlyle’s letters just before the address repeatedly imagine Carlyle, upon facing a public audience for the first time in a quarter-century, internally determining his own death, and “dropping down dead” on stage during the speech (“To Thomas Carlyle” v. 2 287). Each of these morbid fantasies keeps Carlyle’s authority intact, and allows him to escape a situation where the worth of his words is determined by majority vote. Keeling over on-stage would be a rough way to go, but it would perfectly enact Carlyle’s refusal to place himself before an audience; by dying instead of giving a lecture, Carlyle would reject his audience for once and for all.

Carlyle mounts the platform and gives a speech that is largely about the conditions under which he can give such a speech while retaining his authority. The address is a grand oration about the proper relation between author and audience. He opens by accepting the students’ veneration of him; he praises their “noble desire to honour those whom [they] think worthy of honour” and hopes that such hero worship will
“endure to the end.” However, in this tonally complex speech, he immediately begins severely qualifying this remark. He hopes that the students, who chose his ideological adversary Gladstone for their previous Rector, “will come to be more and more select and discriminate in the choice of object of it [the desire to bestow honor] : for I can well understand that you will modify your opinions of me and of many things else, as you go on” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 143). Carlyle’s self-deprecating joke pleases the crowd (transcripts report “Laughter and cheers” at this remark), but reflects a deep uneasiness towards accepting its praise. Reverence is a fundamentally Carlylean (and undemocratic) virtue, but he suggests that the students have not yet learned to exercise this virtue wisely enough or consistently enough for their praise to mean anything.

This alternation between accepting the students’ praise (for perhaps they elected him because they are true disciples who view him as a prophet) and rejecting it (for more likely they elected him because they are an fickle mob who view him as a popular author) marks the opening section of the address. After mentioning the “many judges” and “great variety of fortunes” that he has faced in his pilgrimage, Carlyle tells the students, “We must expect a variety of judges; but the voice of young Scotland, through you, is really of some value to me” (“Inaugural” 143). However, he soon reverts to suggesting, in terms that recall “Stump-Orator,” that in addressing them he is wasting his breath and endangering his soul. “Advices, I believe, to young men, as to all men, are very seldom much valued. There is a great deal of advising, and very little faithful performing; and talk that does not end in any kind of action is better suppressed altogether” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 145, 161). Carlyle, as usual, tentatively resolves this tension as regards the audience, a tension serious enough to shut down speech altogether, by employing his
model of the author as the only true audience; like the speaker in his “Occasional Discourse,” he speaks only to relieve his conscience. “I will endeavour to say nothing that is not true, so far as I can manage; and that is pretty much all I can engage for” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 145).

Having discussed his quandary as regards the audience, and how he continues to speak anyway, Carlyle spends a considerable part of the address explaining to the students what sort of literary audience they should be. The address concerns reading enough for the papers to title it “On the Choice of Books,” and Carlyle carefully explains what one’s relation to books should be. The students should read carefully and diligently, but they should read only what they “truly ha[ve] an appetite for,” what will “improve” them and make them better (“Inaugural” 148-49). In this medical metaphor, reading is not an entertainment—Carlyle explicitly condemns books that “merely excite the astonishment of foolish people” (“Inaugural” 158)—but a nourishment, a matter of “health” and “diet” (“Inaugural” 149). The image eventually reaches spiritual proportions. “I conceive that books are like men’s souls; divided into sheep and goats. Some few [by “noble” people] are going up, and carrying up heavenward . . . Others, a frightful multitude, [those that are “not useful”] are going down, down; doing ever the more and the wider and the wilder mischief” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 157). Carlyle clearly implies two things about reading: one, invariably for good books and often for bad, the text shapes the reader rather than the reader the text; and two, both the good books and the good readers are a select remnant. The “not a very great number of books” written by “noble” people require “ingenuous reader[s]” to find them and read them properly (Carlyle “Inaugural” 157). Those readers not so endowed, Carlyle argues, should absent
themselves from the literary audience altogether. “It would be safer and better for many a reader, that he had no concern with books at all” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 157).

Between these passages giving a general theory of the readership, which cast the true reader as a Carlylean hero-worshipper, Carlyle recommends a few historical books and offers a few observations about history. In these observations, Carlyle offers the speech’s only addition to Carlyle’s theories of audience. In the face of growing agitation for a new reform bill, Carlyle calls for a dictator (or at least an oligarchy) to rule over the masses as firmly as the author rules over his audience and to thereby end growing social chaos and mass decadence. Whenever “the republic [is] composed of little other than bad and tumultuous men,” Carlyle argues, “a Dictator” becomes a “an extremely proper function” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 152). Democracy will be rejected “so soon as there is any fixity in things” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 155), for “reverence” “to those who are greater and better than ourselves” is a central principle of religion and life (Carlyle “Inaugural” 164). A dictatorial educational system is also necessary if this “epoch of anarchy” in which “man” has become “the son” of “Chaos” is to end (Carlyle “Inaugural” 167). To give the nation form and coherence, Britain must hire “the wisest and most sacred men” as teachers and allow them to “bull[y] and dril[l] and compe[l]” their students to think as they ought (Carlyle “Inaugural” 167, 166). As when “rough, rude, ignorant, disobedient people” are beaten into “trained soldiers” by the drillmaster, this new system of education will literally force the nation into shape (Carlyle “Inaugural” 166-67). In this pedagogical fantasia, every part of the public is compelled to respond to wise and sacred men as they ought; they are conscripted into the elect. Carlyle’s desperate fantasy quickly passes, however—he realizes that “any real fulfillment of such things” is “very
far away”—and he returns to his more typical models of audience, popularity as evil and the foreordained character of success or failure (Carlyle “Inaugural” 167). The students should avoid the “vulgarity” of “ambition” and should keep themselves from “too much need[ing] success” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 168). Such concerns only corrupt one, and, anyway, one only receives the reception that “has been appointed,” predestined (Carlyle “Inaugural” 170). Having abandoned his brief hope of an altered world, where the audience is forced to mean something, Carlyle reverts to his model of general rejection redeemed by the consent of the elect. He wraps up by advising the students to “Work and despair not” (Carlyle “Inaugural” 171).11

The address, then, is itself an effective summary of Carlyle’s theories of audience and his varied attempts to fix the value and ensure the effectiveness of his work. The speech will have the value Carlyle imagines for it and effect what it signifies if, like the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, its models of audience prove true. If the speech is rejected by the majority of its hearers, and deeply affects that remnant that accepts it, then Carlyle’s theories of audience and value hold. Like the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, the Edinburgh address will have winnowed the wheat from the chaff, the true votes for Carlyle from the false. The speech which, as we have seen, both offers a schooling in proper readership and puts forth many offensive ideas, offers ample grounds for the reaction it requests. Despite the speech’s great humor and folk wisdom, it sticks close to the “Nigger Question”’s model of the legitimate speaker: compelled by his conscience, a speaker carries out the “not quite” “pleasant” “duty” of attacking his audiences’ most cherished values (such as progressive education and democracy), disregarding the uproar that will
ensue (Carlyle “Inaugural” 144). Carlyle braces himself before and during the speech for this reaction, for confirmation of his status as a prophet.

And it does not come. He does not die, fall silent, or even bomb. To Carlyle’s shock, the speech produces the worst possible result for his constructions of authority: he suddenly becomes popular. In the “Nigger Question,” Carlyle wrote the audience’s responses himself; he compelled the majority to get up and leave. With the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, most readers were happy to do the same. His audience for the Edinburgh address, however, has a mind of its own. As all accounts of the speech stress, it was “listened to with delight” and “ended amidst rounds of applause” (Froude 307).

“Hundreds of lads followed” Carlyle through the streets, “crowding and hurrahing” all the way up to the door of the friend’s house where he was staying (Froude 307). This reaction carries over into the periodical press. The Edinburgh address, contemporary chroniclers agree, renders Carlyle immune to attack until after his death. Froude comments that “Hostile tongues ceased to speak against him, and hostile pens to write. The speech was printed in full in half the newspapers of the island. It was received with universal acclamation” (306). *Punch*, for instance, praises the address, contrasting Carlyle’s earnest speech from his “Caledonian pulpit” with the false rhetoric of the reform-bill-agitating John Bright; *Punch* deems Carlyle a “great man” concerned only with “the Truth” (“Lord” 154). Many papers, including the *Pall Mall Gazette*, praise the speech’s great humor and good advice, and laud the speaker’s rhetorical skills (cf. Shepherd 39-49). Reprinted in book form, the speech goes through three editions in three months, and then sees eleven other printings in various editions before Carlyle’s death (Tarr 199-204).
Freud defines trauma as an unanticipated event that violates and seriously compromises an individual’s self-narrative, leading to a loss of a sense of agency; I define intertextual trauma as an unanticipated textual event that violates and seriously compromises an author’s constructions of authority, leading the author to lose control over his work. Here, the reception of the Edinburgh address violates all of Carlyle’s models of authority, and then comes to be seen as the interpretive key to the rest of Carlyle’s work. Carlyle carefully followed the popular and critical reception of his address, and treats it in both his Reminiscences and letters as an unexpected, unsettling event; as Froude notes, the address’s reception bothered him for the rest of his life (Froude 306). The moment the masses come to like his writing, Carlyle has lost the only objective sign that distinguishes the prophet from the stump-orator, the author who writes his own audience from the author who is written by his audience. Carlyle’s plight is well expressed by a single moment in the address itself. Carlyle bristles, “Oh, it is a dismal chapter all that, if one went into it—what has been done by rushing after fine speech! I have written down some very fierce things about that . . . but they were and are deeply my conviction.” Counter to his apparent intent, the crowd enthusiastically shouts in response, “Hear, hear” (“Inaugural” 161). To the crowd, Carlyle is merely a purveyor of fine speech; having beaten Disraeli at his own game, he is now a stump orator.

As if to confirm Carlyle’s status as a stump orator, this popular speech in no way rewrites or even influences its audience, but instead, inspires the popular press to rewrite or make-over its author. The Times Leader, before launching into a generally laudatory account of the speech, clearly divorces the public’s enjoyment of the address from an acceptance of Carlyle’s ideas, asserting that “A man may differ as much as he pleases
from the doctrines of Mr. Carlyle, he may reject his historical teachings, and may distrust his politics, but he must be of a very unkindly disposition not to be touched by his reception at Edinburgh” (qtd. in Shepherd 42). Reviewers and readers alike see in the speech a Carlyle who is not a confrontational messenger of God but a kindly old man uttering truisms. As the *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote, Carlyle “talked . . . like a patriarch about to leave the world to the young lads . . . . His voice is a soft, downy voice—not a tone in it that is of the shrill, fierce kind that one would expect it to be in reading the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*” (qtd. in Shepherd 37). The positive reviewers thoroughly rewrite Carlyle, and particularly sever him from the author of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, the Carlyle whose rhetoric was, though offensive, entirely self-consistent. Froude sums up the situation: Though the address changes none of Carlyle’s ideas, its generally moderate tone takes the “fire” out of his writings and allows them to be read as if they were mere “church sermons”; as a result, Carlyle is accepted in the public mind as a “fine fellow” who is something of a “preache[r]” (307). The success of the address also leads to the first cheap edition of Carlyle’s collected works, placing the rest of his writings for the first time in the hands of those he thought most likely to misread them (Dyer 124, cf. Kaplan 500-1, Campbell “Reading Carlyle” 2). Carlyle has become, quite exactly, “the fashion of the moment with the multitude” (Froude 320) and must face the fissures in his authority that becoming a mere popular author produces.

Given Carlyle’s theories of biography, one of the worst difficulties that Carlyle’s new popularity produces for his authority is that it is directly responsible for inspiring biographies of him. The Edinburgh address serves as the occasion for two of the first biographies of Carlyle, for, in fact, the first two that we know Carlyle himself read.  

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Jane Carlyle’s letter to Thomas upon reading Shepherd’s biography aptly captures the sense of confusion, indignation, and dispossession that these biographies, even when flattering, triggered. “I read the Memoir ‘first’ yesterday morning . . . . If you call that ‘laudatory,’ you must be easily pleased. I never read such stupid, vulgar janners [sic.]” (“To Thomas Carlyle” April 19, 1866 297). These biographies create a Carlyle designed to fit the reception of the Edinburgh address. Both of these biographies—and Oliphant’s earlier Life of Irving, in which Carlyle is portrayed and which I shall discuss later—praise Carlyle in lavish terms, but subsume Carlyle under a preexistent standard, destroying his singularity and right to self-interpretation. They portray a Carlyle designed to fit the market demand, and, as Carlyle’s theory of biography suggests is inevitable, objectify him in their efforts to interpret him.

The two biographies that are issued on the heels of the Edinburgh address both portray Carlyle as a simple literary success story, an inspiring rags-to-riches tale worthy of Samuel Smiles. These works were written by prominent reviewers (Shepherd in England, Althaus in Germany) and, like the reviews of the address, recast Carlyle as a conventional, solidly middle-class popular author. The Shepherd biography, which so aroused Jane and Thomas Carlyle’s ire, was the best-selling and probably the most outrageous of these rewritings of Carlyle’s life. For Shepherd, Carlyle’s life is just the story of a man making his way in the world. Carlyle takes up writing after becoming “convinced that neither as minister or schoolmaster was he to successfully fight his way up in the world” (Shepherd 11). Since he possesses a natural ability as a writer, Carlyle is successful at pulling himself up by his bootstraps. For Shepherd and the publisher John Hotten, who wrote a “Preliminary” to Shepherd’s biography, the adult Carlyle is
just an unusually skilled writer and orator. “Naturalness” and “shrewd common sense” are his two most distinguishing traits (Shepherd 37).

Shepherd and Hotten’s Carlyle is a genial and prosperously middle-class popular author, who is, quite explicitly, virtually identical to Thackeray or Dickens. Hotten writes, “The general belief that Carlyle is a gloomy misanthrope, scarcely ever seen outside his own door, is quite an error. Like Thackeray—and, indeed, most other sensible authors—he has no disinclination to accept an invitation to a good dinner” (Hotten 5). Their Carlyle spends his spare time like a converted Scrooge; he is socially awkward, but delights in giving “extravagant quantities of cheap sweet meats to the poorer neighbor children” (Hotten 7). Among the many other authors he resembles, the Sage of Chelsea is also very much like the Sage of Highgate, whom he had long hated. Glibly or maliciously ignoring Carlyle’s famous mockery in his Life of Sterling of Coleridge’s conversational style, Hotten calls Carlyle’s conversational monologues “perhaps, the best living representation of Coleridge’s style and manner” (5, cf. Campbell Thomas Carlyle 94, Carlyle Sterling 55). This staid Carlyle also pays public homage to conventional Christianity; far from the man who refused to participate in his parents’ family prayers, this Carlyle “bow[s] very low” during the prayer that precedes his talk at Edinburgh (Shepherd 34). The great rhetorical prowess of the address itself reveals the true nature of Carlyle’s artistry, which is no way different from the artistry of other authors. As Shepherd writes, “Carlyle’s real anathemas against rhetoric were but the expression of his knowledge that there is a rhetoric beyond all other arts” (40). The German Althaus, the translator of the last volume of Frederick, wrote the other biography of Carlyle to come out at this time. Whether because of ideology or the confusion that
comes with analyzing a foreign literary scene, Althaus also wrote a work that makes Carlyle very much the rising middle-class artist. Althaus was a more accurate biographer than Shepherd, and his distortion of Carlyle’s life into a simple success story is more a matter of omission—he leaves out the literary, financial and emotional crises of the early 1820s and early 1830s that were crucial to Carlyle’s self-definition—than of commission. The result, however, is the same: Carlyle is the epitome of the conventional Victorian gentleman and crowd-pleasing professional author.

Of all the different accounts of Carlyle, Thomas and Jane were most bothered by the reduction of Carlyle to a mere popular author. Thomas Carlyle said that Hotten’s “Preliminary” in particular was “balderdash” and Jane complained that the Scrooge-like, child-loving Carlyle was “The last of calumnies that I should ever have expected to hear” (Jane Carlyle, “To Thomas Carlyle,” April 19, 1866, 297; Thomas Carlyle “To Jane Carlyle” April 20, 1866, 394). Hotten’s crime was all the more damaging in that he had also seized possession of Carlyle’s life and work in a more literal, economic sense. The Hotten and Shepherd biography was not an independent volume, but a long preface to John Hotten’s edition of Carlyle’s Edinburgh address, which was published with the title On the Choice of Books. Hotten, a publisher who specialized in cheap reprints of respected literature whose copyrights had recently expired (cf. Altick 307), had simply reset the text of the address as it appeared in the newspapers, and so owed no copyright duties to Carlyle. Carlyle had intended to revise the address as he had his other printed speeches, and publish it with his regular publisher, Chapman. Hotten’s edition, which got out first and had Hotten and Shepherd’s appealing biographical preface, vastly outsold and in effect destroyed Chapman’s authorized edition.
Carlyle most explicitly discusses his ire at Hotten in his footnotes to the *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, written in 1868, a year after he completed the Reminiscences. As both the *Reminiscences*’ original editor, J. A. Froude, and best recent critic, David Amigoni, have noted, Carlyle’s notes to the *Letters and Memorials* are so closely connected to the Reminiscences that they serve in some sense as an extension of the work.14 These notes, which Carlyle carefully polished for publication, comprise a sort of second memoir, and they briefly retell most of the major incidents of the *Reminiscences*, sometimes adding information or commentary left out of the earlier work.15 As Carlyle retells the reception of the Edinburgh address, he adds a crucial detail omitted in the *Reminiscences*. He bitterly complains that “a London pirate [Hotten] quite forestalled” him and ruined the book he intended to make of the address, causing an inferior work—which he elsewhere calls “the spurious address”—to be sold under his name (Carlyle *Letters and Memorials* 293, 295; “To Jane Carlyle,” April 15, 1866 390). Repeating his derogatory epithet for Hotten, Carlyle also mourns that his life has now been written “By [a] London pirate” (*Letters and Memorials* 297, emphasis Carlyle’s). As Carlyle explicitly suggests, Hotten and Shepherd’s biography cements their theft of Carlyle’s literary identity; they have created a spurious author to write the spurious address.

Carlyle considered autobiography allowable only in one situation: when the isolated integrity of the self has already been violated by widely available and largely false biographies of the subject.16 In his *Life of Sterling* Carlyle had theorized that the unity of the self is best preserved in silence, but when that silence has already been broken by the speech of others, speech about the self becomes permissible as a partial
restorative, an attempt to reforge the unity of the self in a new interpretive synthesis. I have already referenced Carlyle’s assertion that Sterling would have been better off if left without a biography. In the same passage, Carlyle goes on to remark, “Such lot, however, could now no longer be my good Sterling’s; a tumult [due to Deacon Hare’s biography] having risen around his name, enough to impress some pretended likeness of him (about as much like as the Guy-Fauxes on Gunpowder-Day) upon the minds of many men: so that he could not be forgotten, and could only be misremembered, as matters now stood” (*Life of Sterling* 7). Carlyle’s justification for writing a biography about Sterling, a friend whose integrity and right to self-interpretation he respected, is analogous to his belief that, while self-consciousness is always a sign of disease, for the soul already diseased it can be the first “attempt towards cure” (“Characteristics” 276, cf. 261). In comments jotted in the margins of a copy of Althaus’s biography and dating from the period of the *Reminiscences*, Carlyle explicitly extends this theory to autobiography. He would prefer “endless silence” about Jane and himself, but realizes “that is probably impossible or unattainable” since “probably various persons will make attempts upon” his biography after he is “gone”; hence, he must write his own life to limit the number of “errors they set afloat” and to permit “here and there a bit of certainty” (Althaus 23, 122). Since his life is already subject to the objectification and the fluctuating value of the biographical subject, an autobiography can hardly make matters worse, and may, by placing some legitimate speech about Carlyle on the market, even make the public discussion of him slightly less intellectually bankrupt.

Jane’s prophecy was, in some figurative sense, fulfilled after all. Carlyle did die on-stage at the Edinburgh address. The self-possessed, prophetic Carlyle died, and was
replaced by (to use Newman’s image) a “scarecrow” of Carlyle designed to fit the
requirements of a capitalistic, mass-market age (cf. *Apologia* 361). As Carlyle laments in
the *Reminiscences*, he now lives in Disraeli-land, a world in which Disraeli is king;
meaning is variable, value is determined by crowd response, and quacks rule the hour.
He asserts that Britain’s new “kind of citizen” is best exemplified by “Rothschild money-
changers [and] Demosthenic Disraelis,” then exclaims “Weep, Britain, if these latter are
among the honourable you now have” (*Reminiscences* 207). The anti-Semitism in this
passage is almost so overwhelming as to distract one from its content. In his Edinburgh
address, Carlyle had depicted Demosthenes as the prototype of the stump orator, the “fine
speaker” who does not speak the “truth” and misleads the people by telling them what
they want to hear (161); the Rothschilds are here condemned as “money-changers,” pure
capitalists who derive their income not from a material product whose value is
represented by currency, but rather from currency itself. The backdrop for the
*Reminiscences*’ narrative of Carlyle’s life in early nineteenth-century Scotland is a late
nineteenth-century England ruled by stump oratory and supply and demand, an England
over which Disraeli rules and of which Hotten and Shepherd’s Carlyle is a loyal citizen.

III: “Independent of the World”: The *Reminiscences* Rewrite Carlyle’s Biographers

Carlyle writes the *Reminiscences* in an attempt to undo the effects of the
Edinburgh address, to remove his identity as an author and the value of his work from
world of the market, from the sphere of supply and demand. Since Carlyle’s unexpected,
newfound popularity is the reason his authority has been destabilized, one might say that
Carlyle writes to overcome the trauma of popularity. To recover a stable level of authority, he will systematically establish his own singularity and demonstrate his isolation from all other authors and from his own readership. He will explain how the mistake of his popularity happened, gain a “sense of mastery” by narrating what went wrong, and restore his self-consistency and authority by interpreting the event (cf. Freud Beyond 24). As we will see in our other sages, other texts—the reviews, Shepherd and Hotten’s and Althaus’s biographies, and Oliphant’s Life of Irving—have violated the boundaries of Carlyle’s texts and usurped his authorial authority, his right to determine the meaning of his self and work. Carlyle’s writings now mean what the reviews say they do (they are compilations of “shrewd common sense”), and Carlyle is merely a sentimental spectacle or object lesson for the public (the loyal friend, the self-made man, the small town boy who made good). As we have seen, Carlyle’s popularity both results in and derives from his loss of authority over his work; he becomes popular because he is considered to be like other popular authors.

Popularity constitutes a trauma in that it exposes Carlyle to the objectifying tendencies of biography, the fluctuating values of the mass market, and a loss of authority over his readers. In Bourdieu’s terms, Carlyle’s recent popularity moves him from a position of literary “autonomy”—as an author who in the literary field possesses prestige (or symbolic capital) and who writes for a select audience that is similarly consecrated—to a position of literary “heteronomy”—as an author who possesses an authority that arises not from the internal logic of the literary field, but, rather from economic forces external to the literary field itself, primarily from market “demand” (46). Trev Broughton, echoing Martin Danahay, asserts that many Victorian autobiographers,
penned in by their own individualism, write autobiographies to both validate their isolated selves and “create” their “social context” (26); Carlyle’s problem is, rather, that his social context has already been created for him. In the *Reminiscences*, Carlyle attempts to interpret his interpreters, thereby restoring his position as a sage, as a master interpreter. Like the Freudian trauma victim, he will expel the foreign object and reestablish the violated boundaries around his (textual) self through narration.

Carlyle attempts to throw off Hotten and Shepherd’s scarecrow of himself and escape from Disraeli’s England by two primary means: he will show that his identity is not derived from England as it now is, but rather from a Scotland that has now vanished, and he will show that he is not a friendly popular writer, but rather one who loathes and lampoons popular writers as a whole. Carlyle’s narrative of his early life in Scotland will locate his authority in a part of his experience lived outside the public eye and therefore seemingly invulnerable to interpretation and debate, while his satire of the London literary scene will confirm that he is indeed a singular author who cannot be understood in terms of conventional models of authorship. Carlyle’s famously grim mood in the *Reminiscences* also serves as an underlying—and occasionally, explicit—assertion of his isolation from all known authors and audiences. He has, as he says, the “continual gloom and grimness . . . of a man set too nakedly *versus* the Devil and All men” (*Reminiscences* 89, emphasis Carlyle’s).

Carlyle grounds his isolation and, thereby, his authority on two incontestable and seemingly commonplace elements of his life: his place of birth (rural Scotland) and choice of a mate (Jane Welsh Carlyle). Carlyle’s heritage consolidates his marginal status, showing him to be trebly an outsider in the literary community. He is a Scotsman
in England, a farmer’s son in urban London, and—at least by birth—a Scottish Seceder in the domain of the Established Church. Carlyle implies that his unusual background provides him with a vantage point so ec-centric as to enable him to view English society from the outside, and to see truths about it that are hidden to others. He organically possesses the sage’s marginal status; by accident of birth he is sufficiently removed the system to interpret it. Carlyle foils Annandale—a collective term for Carlyle’s hometown of Ecclefechan and the neighboring town of Annan—with capitalist England, casting Annandale as an organic society whose virtues throw the vices of England into sharp relief. Carlyle asserts that while the Annandale of his youth, like any other city, has its share of idiots, it generally possesses both an ideal citizenry—the “happiest set of Yeomen I ever came to see”—and true priest/leaders—the Seceder clergy, the only “antique Evangelists in modern vesture” still left “in any country of the world” (Carlyle Reminiscences 203, 208).

Perhaps most importantly, Annandale contains a number of characters who embody Carlyle’s ideals of the hero and the hero-worshipper. As George Landow suggests, the guardians of the traditional wisdom of a stable, undivided society are the cleric and the educator (prophets serve an analogous function in a different situation by preaching a new truth to an unstable, divided society). As Carlyle tells it, Annandale’s Seceder clergy are heroically “true and wise . . . silently resting on nature and intrinsic fact against all comers”; consequently, every man in the Annandale area who realizes that he “actually ha[s] a soul” heeds their teachings (Reminiscences 207-8). Correspondingly, Annan’s schoolmaster, Adam Hope, is the ideal educator. As the teacher of an organic society, Adam Hope to a large measure shapes the ideas and values of the inhabitants of
this society; to a certain extent, he makes the society an organic reality rather than an artificial sham. As Carlyle says, “More rigorously solid teacher of the young idea, so far as he could carry it, you might have searched for through the world in vain. Self-delusion, sham instead of reality, could not get existed in his presence” (*Reminiscences* 205). Fittingly, Hope also possesses the complete control over his audience for which Carlyle often yearns. Hope himself has a “contemptuous” view of others, and pulls out “the net amount of faculty discoverable in each” of his students by means of a dictatorial system of education that forces students to learn through beatings and confinements (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 205-6). Uncoincidentally, Carlyle also identifies Adam Hope as Annandale’s only published author (*Reminiscences* 205). Carlyle was one of Adam Hope’s last students (*Reminiscences* 204), and implicitly is now his heir in a different land and time; as Britain ceases to be a stable, undivided society, the teacher of traditional wisdom gives way to the confrontational sage.

In sum, Carlyle implies that he is fit to critique British society and religion because he has seen an organic society, the Scottish society of his youth, and can judge inorganic England—and inorganic present-day Scotland—by the contrast. This rhetorical strategy becomes most explicit when Carlyle contrasts current Britain and its “Demosthenic Disraelis” with the “kind of citizen” Annandale possessed (*Reminiscences* 206-7). Carlyle exemplifies this contrast by means of a story about Adam Hope’s uncle, Old David Hope. In this story, dangerously high winds and a “deluge” of rain suddenly hit Annandale, but Old David Hope refuses to interrupt his “family worship” to go out and save his crops. When a neighbor “rush[es] in” and warns that he must act immediately to avoid a failed harvest, Old David replies, “Wind canna get ae straw that
has been appointed mine; sit down, and let us worship God’ (that rides in the whirlwind)!” (Carlyle Reminiscences 207). As this passage suggests, Annandale is a place where value, rooted in divine truth, is fixed, and the results of one’s efforts do not depend on variable, outside factors, but are predestined from all eternity. In short, Annandale is a place where the Carlylean models of audience and authorship hold true, and a direct foil to Disraeli’s England. In one of the more subtle and central moves of the narrative, Carlyle’s stress on and idealization of Scotland serves as a means of removing himself from a world where the value of his work fluctuates and his identity has become unsettled into a world where not “ae straw that has been appointed” his can be taken away from him (and, presumably, none that are unappointed can be added). Since few famous Victorian writers are from rural Scotland, Carlyle’s narrative of Annandale is difficult to contest and nearly impossible to falsify, and through it his isolation and authority are restored. Since Carlyle considers the Annandale of 1866 to be no longer an organic society and the Seceder Kirk of 1866 to be no longer a true religion, his narrative of his youth disenfranchises his English audience as legitimate judges of his life without enfranchising a (living) Scottish audience in its place (cf. Reminiscences 209, 264).

Annandale’s current residents, who could perhaps contradict his interpretations of the area, are shams whose opinions ought to be ignored; the true Annandale from which Carlyle’s authority is derived apparently exists at present only in Carlyle’s memory.

The second principal basis of Carlyle’s literary authority in the Reminiscences also is derived from rural Scotland. Carlyle possesses the ideal literary audience, Jane Welsh Carlyle, whom he met while teaching in rural Scotland. Ian Campbell has alleged that the Reminiscences are written as a response to Carlyle losing his “domestic
audience,” and one of Jane Carlyle’s principal roles in the text is to model the proper response to Carlyle’s writing (“Reading Carlyle” 9). She is cast as the ideal hero-worshipper. Carlyle writes that she “loyal[ly]” “approved” of his most controversial works and that her reception, unlike that of Carlyle’s various publics, was stable and invariable. As her “opinion” of him “was curiously unalterable from the first,” “she cared little about criticisms of [him], good or bad,” and joined him in “innocent laughter” at the “‘Hostility of the Press’” towards his late work (*Reminiscences* 103-5, 149). She is his true audience, the embodiment of the Carlylean elect. As Carlyle writes with regard to the reception of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, “In the whole world I had one complete Approver [Jane]; in that, as in other cases, one; and it was worth all” (*Reminiscences* 149). As Carlyle attempts to reestablish his isolation, to show his severance from his critics, biographers, and audience, he will establish his legitimacy by showing his true Scottishness and, as Tom Lloyd has pointed out, the inevitability of Jane Carlyle’s choice of him (10).

The *Reminiscences* derive Jane Carlyle’s status as the ideal audience from her descent from John Knox, whom Carlyle considered to be the archetype of the Scottish prophet. Thomas Carlyle called Knox the “Prophet to the Scotch,” whose influence is lodged “heart’s core” of all true “Scotch Literature and Thought” (*Carlyle Heroes* 191, 199). Praise of Knox runs throughout Carlyle’s writing, from *Heroes and Hero-Worship* in 1840 to the “Essay on the Portraits of John Knox” in 1875. Jane Welsh’s branch of the Welshes, Carlyle informs us, are descended from the “Reverend John Welsh of Ayr of Rochelle” who married a “Daughter of Knox” (*Reminiscences* 74). Jane’s claim of John Knox as an ancestor seems to have been surprisingly well known at the time; Shepherd’s
biography, which consistently misspells her maiden name (invariably, “Welch”), still manages to call her “a lineal descendant of John Knox, and a lady fitted in every way to be the wife of such a man [as Carlyle]” (17). Carlyle reckons Jane’s descent from Knox “probable, though quite express document are unknown to” him; all “likelihood,” he thinks, points in that direction (Reminiscences 74, 109, emphasis Carlyle’s). He has, in a sense, married into the prophetic aristocracy; in a turn that would please Eve Sedgwick, Jane Carlyle’s tie to the “Prophet of the Scotch” implicitly authorizes Thomas Carlyle as Scotland’s new prophet.

By consistently chiming a series of variations on these basic tropes (his Annandale origins and marriage to Jane Welsh), the Reminiscences, alone among Carlyle’s works, offer a relatively complete account of his life in terms of his sage system. Carlyle experiences the spiritual conversion that also constitutes his prophetic call when, as the Reminiscences stress, he is isolated in one the “poor[er] Annandale localities,” Hoddam Hill (321). As his model of the author/audience relation might lead one to expect, Carlyle’s conversion consists especially in the act of severing himself from the rest of the world. In his conversion, he comes to reject self-doubt and the popular skepticism of the age; as he does so, he finds that he now can, through force of will and exercise in perspective, create himself anew. Carlyle begins his conversion a miserable, skeptical, divided soul and ends it a happy, believing, unified prophet. He abandons his “agonizing doubtings, fearful wrestlings with the foul and vile and soul-murdering Mud-gods of [his] Epoch” and escapes into what seems an alternate, isolated world, the “eternal blue of ether” where in his “spiritual part” he will henceforth live. Casting off the chaotic and formless outer world, which would confine him, encase him, and render
him indistinct, Carlyle sets his spirit free. Carlyle, metaphorically born again, now views other people and their ideas as if from an infinite distance; he look[s] down upon the welterings of [his] poor fellow-creatures . . . and ha[s] no concern whatever in their Puseyisms, Ritualisms, Metaphysical controversies and cobwebberies and no feeling of [his] own, except honest silent pity for the serious or religious part of them, and occasional indignation for the poor world’s sake, at the frivolous secular and impious part, with their Universal Suffrages . . . and “Unexampled Prosperities.” (Reminiscences 321)

As the contrast between the converted Carlyle’s timeless world—the “eternal blue of ether”—and unconverted England’s temporal world—a world of “Universal Suffrages” and “Unexampled Prosperities”—clearly implies, the main function of Carlyle’s conversion is to free him from the influence of an external world whose influence, expressed in terms of votes or pounds, could determine the content or value of his thought. Towards the end of this passage, Carlyle quite plainly ascribes this meaning to his conversion. “In a fine and veritable sense,” he writes, “I, poor, obscure, without outlook, almost without worldly hope, had become independent of the world” (Reminiscences 321, emphasis mine). The Carlylean prophet is quite precisely one who is independent of his audience, and Carlyle becomes one on Hoddam Hill, the same place, uncoincidentally, where his courtship of Jane finally becomes successful and he becomes engaged (cf. Reminiscences 320, 322). Severed from the false audience of the world, he now possesses his true audience.

Carlyle’s development as an isolated author comes to a head on another isolated Scottish farm, Craigenputtock, as Carlyle, now married, sits down to write Sartor Resartus. The Reminiscences treat Craigenputtock as the paradisaical state; Carlyle’s life in London is judged according to what degree he has been able to maintain this pristine
Scottish isolation. In Edinburgh, where he and Jane lived early in their marriage, Carlyle was in “base agony arising mainly in the want of any extant or discernible fence between my coarser fellow-creatures and my more sensitive self”; Craigenputtock provides him with the shield against stimuli he needs for his model of self and authorship (*Reminiscences* 357). The connection between Carlyle’s authorial authority and the rejection of audience that Craigenputtock represents is particularly clearly expressed in an often-reprinted letter of Carlyle to Goethe: “I came hither solely with the design to . . . secure the independence through which I could be enabled to remain true to myself. This bit of earth [the “loneliest” “nook” “in Britain”] is our own: here we can live, write, and think, as best pleases ourselves, even though Zoilus himself were to be crowned the monarch of literature” (qtd. in Ballantyne 15; also qtd. in Shepherd 19). The *Reminiscences* put the matter more succinctly. At Craigenputtock, Carlyle is “perfectly left alone, and able to do more work, beyond doubt, than elsewhere” (*Reminiscences* 82-83, emphasis Carlyle’s). The *Reminiscences* value and dwell on *Sartor Resartus* more than any other of Carlyle’s works and pointedly assert that *Sartor Resartus* was his “last considerable bit of Writing at Craigenputtock” (82). Quite plainly, in this narrative, when Carlyle is closed up and cut off from all audiences but himself and his chosen Jane, he is the pure prophet and artist and does his best work. Since Craigenputtock is an inheritance of Jane’s coming down to her ultimately from the “Reverend John Welsh” who married Knox’s daughter, Thomas Carlyle also comes into the fullness of his authorship under Knox’s patronage (*Reminiscences* 108).

The Carlyles’ mature life in overpopulated, literary London is treated in the *Reminiscences* most often as a sad comedy. As I shall show in some detail later, Carlyle
depicts London as the city of the mob, a city of the mass audience, a city that destroys and kills anyone foolish enough to love it. The *Reminiscences*’ account of London primarily mocks famous literary figures and praises Jane’s attempts to shield Thomas from London’s barrage of people and of stimuli. Jane “d[oes] all the society,” and protects Carlyle from the “dull and prosaic fellows . . . who . . . manag[e] to intrude upon” him, allowing him the concentration he needs to write his literary works (Carlyle *Reminiscences* 148). She silences noisy neighbors and their “Demon-Fowls” and oversees the construction of the famous soundproof room, intended to be the physical embodiment of Carlyle’s model of authorship, “impervious . . . to everything but self and work”; she also corrects the workers’ poor construction job and renders the room inhabitable for Carlyle, allowing him to write *Frederick* (*Reminiscences* 154-55). His contempt for others and Jane’s care for him allow Thomas Carlyle to remain unaffected by London’s teeming sea of people; the perfect audience saves him from being crushed by a false audience.

This basic narrative pattern, in which the external world is a distant illusion to Thomas Carlyle and Jane Carlyle is the only audience worth caring about, allows Carlyle to successfully narrate any possible textual reception, for, as in one of Carlyle’s favorite models of reader reception, the public reception will be only the illusory response of a false audience. I have already noted in passing Carlyle’s narrative of the reception of the *French Revolution* and *Latter-Day Pamphlets*; more importantly, Carlyle finds even the root of his trauma, the reception of the Edinburgh address, narratable in this context. Just prior to discussing the Edinburgh address, Carlyle asserts, in accord with his wishes but counter to all apparent fact, that his “Books were not, nor will ever be ‘popular’”

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(Reminiscences 103). The aim of the Reminiscences’ treatment of the Edinburgh address is to confront the elided verb in this sequence (“are”), the fact that Carlyle’s books are, in fact, presently popular. Carlyle narrates the Edinburgh address as an illusory, meaningless experience yielding an illusory, meaningless result. While the experience is as horrifying as nightmare, it also has a nightmare’s transitory, insubstantial character, and is, like a nightmare, a delusion. The Rectorship, Carlyle complains, is “an inane though rather amusing hurly burly of empty congratulations, imaginary businesses, etc, etc.” (Carlyle Reminiscences 187, emphasis mine). The day of the address is a wretched day, made wretched by the dominance of the mob, “the gloomiest day, nearly intolerable for confusion, crowding, noisy inanity and misery” (Carlyle Reminiscences 189). As Carlyle gives the address, surrounding by the crowd, he in his heart rejects the crowd and the whole situation as a phantasm or nightmare, a move which alone allows him to speak legitimately. Carlyle asserts, “My Speech was delivered as if in a mood of defiant despair, and under the pressure of nightmares. Some feeling that I was not speaking lies, alone sustained me. The applause etc., I took for empty noise” (Reminiscences 189).

The general public reception of the address meets with an even sterner Carlylean rejection as an illusion. Carlyle may be willing to grudgingly concede in retrospect that though the Edinburgh students’ response was largely “empty noise” it was “not altogether” such (Reminiscences 189); however, he gives no such qualifiers when discussing the stupidity of the general public response, which has so disturbingly inflated the value of the address. The passage deserves quoting at some length:

No idea, or shadow of an idea, is in that Address, but what had been set forth by me tens of times before: and the poor gaping sea of Prurient Blockheadism receives it as a kind of inspired revelation;—and runs to buy my Books (it is said)
now when I have got quite done with their buying or refusing to buy. If they were to give me £10,000 a year, and bray unanimously their hosannas heaven-high for the rest of my life,—who now would there be to get the small joy or profit from it? (Reminiscences 104, emphasis Carlyle’s)

The period of the address removed Jane as his audience and replaced her with the fickle mob; the “empty congratulations” of the crowd led to a “fatally tragical” “end” (the death of Jane) (Carlyle Reminiscences 187). Returning to his currency metaphor, Carlyle announces that in this substitution there can be no “profit.” Since Jane is the elect, the true audience, her response was the address’s “one value” to Carlyle, its worth being “nearly naught otherwise (in very truth)” (Reminiscences 190, emphasis Carlyle’s). With Jane, the true audience, dead, the address has no true value, and the apparent value of Carlyle’s work can be made to accord with its actual value only if public demand can be reduced to nil. Hence, Carlyle lashes out at the admirers of his speech, claiming that their admiration is a sure sign of their own stupidity. As Carlyle writes, “The ‘recent return of popularity greater than ever,’ which I hear of, seems due alone to that late Edinburgh affair; especially to the Edinburgh Address; and affords new proof of the singularly dark and feeble condition of ‘Public Judgment’ at this time” (Reminiscences 104). To consolidate his models of authority, Carlyle is willing, if necessary, to denigrate even the address itself as illusory, an unoriginal and uninspired work that the public knew primarily in a spurious form; as the popular form of the address—Hotten’s On the Choice of Books—is not a true work of Carlyle’s, it is only fitting that it is praised by the masses. By disowning the work he delivered as Jane died, Carlyle saves the potential value of the rest of his work; since the Edinburgh address is unoriginal and spurious, its popularity
does not necessarily reflect on his writings as a whole. Alone among Carlyle’s writings, the Edinburgh address, like its reception, is an illusion.

Although he has lost Jane Carlyle, his true audience, Carlyle can still retain his sage status, provided that, as he has suggested, the reception of the Edinburgh address turns out to be a deceptive fluke. To consolidate his authority, Carlyle needs a sudden surge of unpopularity. Deprived of his true audience, the elect, he could revert to another of his models of audience, the author as his own audience, if he could only dispossess himself of his false, mass audience—the “foolish people” in the “newspapers” who made “such a jubilation” over the address (Reminiscences 190)—and once again possess the lack of popularity that distinguishes the sage from the stump orator. To put the matter differently, Carlyle’s worth as an author can be best stabilized if, as he repeatedly begs, he is left alone. A persistent popularity would suggest that the Reminiscences’ basic narrative is wrong, the address was not a fluke, and Carlyle is indeed a popular author. In an effort to imaginatively create the alienation he requires, in the Reminiscences Carlyle repeatedly mocks both his audience and the whole breed of popular authors. The Reminiscences’ continual and often noted exclamations of Carlyle’s isolation from all living beings are both the miserable lamentations of a depressed widower and the petitions of a self-conscious author for the conditions under which his authority can be retained.

The Reminiscences attempt to enact Carlyle’s isolation from the popular authors and popular audiences of the London literary scene by depicting him as a perpetual stranger in the literary world. The Reminiscences—especially the last section, “Reminiscences of Sundry”—create a picture of Carlyle as a self-contained literary

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outsider by implicitly contrasting him with a long series of satirically rendered popular authors. They depict a Carlyle who could not possibly resemble a popular author and whom no popular audience could like for long. Far from the amiable, impressionable member of the literary fraternity that Hotten and Shepherd depict, the mature Carlyle—post-conversion, post-*Sartor*, post-nuptials—is an acerbic loner who despises the herd of popular authors and the entire popular audience, as he will demonstrate through a series of scathing examples. A short survey of Carlyle’s depictions of major authors will serve to illustrate the point. To Carlyle, Lamb is “shallo[w],” his speech “screwed into . . . ghastly make-believe of wit,” his whole behavior “diluted insanity” (*Reminiscences* 84). The root of these problems is “Cockneydom”’s praise of him, which has “bewildered his poor head, and churned nearly all the sense out of the poor man” (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 85). Leigh Hunt is a charming man with “sparkling talk,—wanting only wisdom of a sound kind, and true insight into fact” (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 89). John Stuart Mill, whose connection with Carlyle the Althaus biography stresses, is “macerated, changed, and fanaticised” since the days of their friendship, as his pretentious use of his middle name reflects; he is now the “saw-dust” “masthead” of the radical press, not a “speaking” man (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 96). Coleridge, “venerated by those about” Carlyle as “a sage,” proves to be a “puffy, anxious . . . fattish . . . hobbl[ing]” man who monologues about matters “of no interest” (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 289). Shelley is “ghastly . . . spasmodic, hysterical, instead of strong or robust” (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 397). Wordsworth is praiseworthy for his “strong intellectual powers” and “contemp[t] of the unmeditative world and its noisy nothingness,” but is “rather dull . . . and almost wearisome,” too interested in language and not enough interested in finding truths to say
in language (Carlyle *Reminiscences* 401, 403). The “foolish,” newspaper-reading public that likes these authors, the *Reminiscences* make clear, could not possibly like the likes of Carlyle for long. As he asserts in “Sundry,” Carlyle “suspect[s]” that when the “Plebs of Literature” vote on him, “the Guilties clean ha[ve] it” (*Reminiscences* 395, emphasis Carlyle’s).

Each of these authors, who together comprise the dominant figures of the English literary scene over a fifty year period, is implicitly foiled with the Carlylean model of the prophet. These famous authors fail to write work of lasting value because they are overly concerned about either audience (Lamb, Mill) or the faculties of eloquence (Wordsworth, Hunt) and so lack true authority, control of self and work (Shelley, Coleridge). Hence, Carlyle can dismiss them all as he dismisses Thackeray’s positive review of *The French Revolution*: “‘One other poor judge voting,’ I said to myself; ‘but what is he, or such as he? The fate of that thing [*The French Revolution*] is fixed! I have written it; that is all my result” (*Reminiscences* 394, emphasis Carlyle’s). Only Southey, who shows himself to be among the elect by receiving *The French Revolution* not as a mere popular book but as divine wisdom—“a salutary bit of ‘scriptural’ exposition for the public and for mankind”—is given any real praise (Carlyle *Reminiscences* 395). In his discussion of Thackeray’s review, Carlyle makes my point himself: by disassociating himself from the opinions and identities of other major authors, by showing that—counter to Hotten’s assertion—he is not “like Thackeray—and, indeed, most other sensible authors,” he fixes the value of his self and work, and frees himself from both his reviewers and his public. As might have been expected, following the death of Jane Carlyle, the *Reminiscences*’ final model of audience is the author as audience; since Carlyle was unpopular in the
past, and, one can reasonably assume, he will be unpopular in the future (cf. *Reminiscences* 103), his present popularity can be dismissed as an illusion. His authorship, he asserts, is its own result; in part because of the present narrative, his work will again have a set audience, an audience of one.

IV: The Battle To Be “Prophet to the Scotch”: Carlyle vs. Jeffrey, Irving, and Oliphant

The *Reminiscences* would be a much shorter and less structurally complex work, however, if Carlyle were able to reestablish his complete singularity and authority in the straightforward manner I have been sketching. In Peter Brooks’ understanding of plot, the *Reminiscences* would then need very little plot, as they would proceed in a very quick and direct line to the object of Carlyle’s desire, the restoration of his authority. More specifically, the work would be half as long, retaining the beginning (“Jane Welsh Carlyle”) and end (“Sundry”), but dropping the middle (“Francis Jeffrey” and the bulk of “Edward Irving”). However, Carlyle’s separation from his mass audience holds only if his narrative of the Edinburgh address holds, and this narrative holds only if the *Reminiscences*’ argument for Carlyle’s unique literary authority holds. And while the grounds on which Carlyle bases his literary authority hold against most major authors, they are not quite specific enough to apply to Carlyle alone. Carlyle’s constructions of authority in the *Reminiscences* are seriously undermined by the existence of two authors who share both his Scottish origins and his love for Jane Welsh: Francis Jeffrey, the politician and editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, and Edward Irving, the preacher and popular author. If the first section of the *Reminiscences*, “Jane Welsh Carlyle,” is devoted to recalling Carlyle’s discovery and retention of both his literary vocation and
ideal domestic audience, the next two sections, “Edward Irving” and “Francis Jeffrey,” will be devoted to proving that Carlyle—not Irving or Jeffrey—has the right to possess this identity and this audience. Though “Edward Irving” precedes “Francis Jeffrey” in the Reminiscences, I will discuss the latter section before the former, as the latter section rhetorically doubles the former, and its rhetorical strategies are much more transparent.

Francis Jeffrey’s association with Carlyle was well known, and his existence is a nightmare for Carlyle in the Reminiscences, compromising each of the bases on which Carlyle has established his authority. The early biographies of Carlyle stress that “Francis Jeffrey, the editor of the Edinburgh Review” was one of Carlyle’s “Edinburgh” “friends” in his younger days (Shepherd 21).20 Ever fond of depicting the literary world as a vast club, Shepherd delights in associating Carlyle with Jeffrey, the Edinburgh Review’s greatest editor with its greatest product. It was well known that Jeffrey, dubbed “The Prince of Critics” by contemporaries (Ballantyne 11), had arranged for Carlyle’s most important early publications, his articles in the Edinburgh Review. As the Reminiscences suggest, Jeffrey poses a special threat to Carlyle’s claim that, like a true prophet, he has always written the truth as he perceives it, without regard for the opinions of the critics or public. Though Carlyle insists that he behaved independently in his relations with Jeffrey and even deliberately offended him, Jeffrey was, as the Reminiscences admit, both the first editor to reject and the first editor to regularly publish Carlyle’s writing (Reminiscences 357-60). To all appearances, then, Jeffrey is an audience that rules Carlyle and possesses authority over his work.

Jeffrey is also a threat to the bases on which the Reminiscences attempt to construct Carlyle’s authority, his Scottishness and Jane Carlyle’s affection. With the rise
of the Whigs to power in 1831, Jeffrey became Lord Advocate, a position Carlyle defines as “political president of Scotland” (Reminiscences 372). Jeffrey’s Edinburgh Review was, especially prior to 1850, the center of the Scottish and, in many ways, the English literary scene; it was considered by many to be “the Review” to write for or read and its judgments were thought to make and unmake authors (Shattock 1, 7). Jeffrey, then, was not just Scottish, but was in his time both the legal and literary ruler of Scotland.21

Worse, as Carlyle grants, Jeffrey was Jane Carlyle’s “openly declared friend and quasi-lover”; he helped Thomas mostly for her sake, and constantly flirted with her in public (Reminiscences 360-61, cf. Campbell Intro. xvii). Though Carlyle insists that Jane and Jeffrey’s “flirting” was “wholly theoretic,” never intended to reach a physical end, he is clearly troubled by it (Reminiscences 360-61).

In the Reminiscences, Carlyle deals with this threat by casting Francis Jeffrey’s successful career as lawyer, editor, and literary critic as an exact foil to the Carlylean model of authorship. The basic contrast is simple, a doubling of Carlyle’s critique of Disraeli: the earnest Carlyle is isolated and crowd-scoring and therefore his words are true and valid; the cynical Jeffrey is gregarious and plays the crowd and therefore his words are false and distorted.22 Carlyle has not “ever acquired in [his] solitary and most silent existence, the art of gently saying strong things, or of insinuating [his] dissent, instead of uttering it right out, at the risk of offence or otherwise” (Reminiscences 369).

For Jeffrey, however, plainly speaking an unpleasant opinion or persisting in a minority position is simply not an option; he was “always as if speaking to a jury: . . . the thing of which he could not convince fifteen clear-headed men, was to him a no-thing” (Carlyle Reminiscences 370). In this pandering to crowd and client, refusing to have ideas of his
own, Jeffrey exemplifies his profession (lawyer), his political philosophy (Whig), and his avocation (review editor). Like all popular writers and members of parliament, Jeffrey is a Stump Orator who knows no truth beyond supply and demand and no authority beyond the opinions of the majority. In terms that recall his attack on Disraeli as a hired tongue, Carlyle ruminates, “It is a strange trade, I have often thought, that of advocate: your intellect, your highest heavenly gift, hung up in the shop-window, like a loaded pistol for sale” (*Reminiscences* 355, cf. 362). He considers Jeffrey to be a kindly fellow and to have some impressive intellectual gifts, even if they have been misused. However, like all “Law Sages,” as Carlyle dubs them, Jeffrey has sold his agency and has no authority (*Reminiscences* 355).

Lacking literary authority and persisting in a false model of authorship, the Jeffrey of the *Reminiscences* cannot remain successful. The heights of success he has reached in literature and politics must prove illusory; the authority he has taken as spokesman for the crowd must revert back to the crowd. In a pattern whose similarity to Carlyle’s treatment of Irving several critics have noticed, in the *Reminiscences* Jeffrey rises to the top of his profession, moves to London, accomplishes little of real worth there, has his health destroyed by “the incessant press of crowds,” and dies, destroyed by the audience he tried so hard to please (372). Ultimately, the *Reminiscences* suggest, Jeffrey’s opinion could not possibly have determined the young Carlyle’s worth, as Jeffrey has always been so eager to anticipate the demands of his audience that he has never determined anything himself. As Jeffrey himself complains, even as Lord Advocate, he is “made a mere Post-Office of” (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 373). Literally as well as metaphorically, Jeffrey is merely a point through which other people’s ideas pass,
the epitome of the editor and the antithesis of the author. Carlyle can therefore dismiss the importance of his friendship with Jeffrey, and calmly assert that Jeffrey played no pivotal role in establishing his career. Carlyle says that in his youth “Jeffrey’s acquaintanceship seemed, and was for the time, an immense acquisition to me; and everyone regarded it as my highest good fortune,—though in the end it did not practically amount to much” (Reminiscences 361, emphasis mine). Since Jeffrey has no individual agency, but is merely a walking reflection of public opinion, nothing that he says or does can practically amount to much.

Jeffrey’s lack of self-possession ultimately costs him not only his agency, but also the Reminiscences’ primary markers of authority: the love of Jane Carlyle and Scottishness. Jeffrey’s manner of courting the objects of his affection reveals his lack of agency, or even humanity. In his relations with women, as in his relationships with readers and voters, Jeffrey is too eager to please, full of flatteries, “trip[ping] about half like a lap dog, half like a human adorer” (Carlyle Reminiscences 361). Though he amuses Jane for a while, naturally he cannot win Jane, the ideal audience, through such contentless pandering. As Thomas Carlyle passes into his full authority as an author by writing “the finale of the French Revolution,” and both Thomas and Jane Carlyles’ “struggle with the world” becomes increasingly “stern and grim,” Jane determines to give the frivolous Jeffrey “up, and nearly altogether cease[s] corresponding” with him (Reminiscences 380). Jeffrey’s desire to please even costs him his Scottishness. To fit in while in college at Oxford, Jeffrey “peremptorily crushe[s] down his Scotch,” replacing it with “syllables” so “elaborately English or English and more” that the English themselves find his speech strange, and the Scottish say that “The laddie has clean tint his
Scotch, and found nae English” (Carlyle *Reminiscences* 375-76). Untrue to himself and constantly altering his language to fit his audience, Jeffrey possesses no coherent language to speak.

Towards the end of “Francis Jeffrey,” having disassociated himself from and having established his authority over his subject, Carlyle spells out the implications of his critique of Jeffrey for literature as a whole. Jeffrey’s *Edinburgh Review* was a vastly influential publication in the first half of the nineteenth century and played an important role in creating the respectable, bourgeois literary world from which Carlyle is in the *Reminiscences* desperately trying to free himself. As Carlyle remarks, at Jeffrey’s height, “his *Edinburgh Review* [was] a kind of Delphic Oracle and Voice of the Inspired, for great majorities of what is called the ‘Intelligent Public’” (*Reminiscences* 382). This “Intelligent Public” and its authors (mis)shape themselves by an endlessly recursive process of criticism, as the authors write what they think this public will buy, and the tastes of this public are shaped by what they read. In the process, any sense of authority or of the Real is lost. These authors, essentially, live out Carlyle’s attack on reviews in “Characteristics”; literature “become[s] one boundless self-devouring review” (282). As Carlyle writes, Jeffrey “may be said to have begun the rash reckless style of criticizing everything in Heaven and Earth by appeal to Moliere’s Maid; ‘Do you like it? Don’t you like it?’” (*Reminiscences* 382, emphasis Carlyle’s).

As earlier in “Stump-Orator” and later in “Shooting Niagara,” Carlyle connects the rise of popular literature, in which the fickle opinions of the masses dictate what an author writes, with the rise of democracy, in which the fickle opinions of the masses dictate how a government acts. Carlyle reflects that “‘Democracy,’ the gradual uprise,
and rule in all things, of roaring, million-headed, unreflecting, darkly suffering, darkly sinning ‘Demos,’ come to call its old superiors to account, at its maddest of tribunals: nothing in my time has so forwarded all this as Jeffrey and his once famous *Edinburgh Review*” (*Reminiscences* 382). Put differently, though Jeffrey may be from Scotland, he has not just betrayed his Scottish identity, but has played a significant role in preparing the way for the Disraelian England from which the *Reminiscences* attempt to escape.

And, as no one author or party can remain popular forever, the literary world that Jeffrey has helped to create must ultimately turn on and destroy Jeffrey’s own work. As Carlyle observes, though Jeffrey was once called reverently called “the Trismegistus,” now Jeffrey is “hardly. . . by the generality remembered at all!” (*Reminiscences* 382).

Consumed by the forces he helped to create, Jeffrey is now dead both as an individual and as an author, and no longer a threat to Carlyle’s constructions of authority.

The “Edward Irving” section of the *Reminiscences* is five times the length of the “Francis Jeffrey” section, perhaps in part because Irving is a greater problem for Carlyle’s authority than is Jeffrey. Irving represents the primary threat to the manner in which Carlyle has constructed authority on his rural Scottish origins. As Amigoni alone among critics notes, Carlyle must discuss Irving if he is to establish his “authorial position” (“Displacing” 130).²³ For Carlyle, improbably enough, is not Annandale’s only famous son. As Irving in the days of their youthful friendship had predicted to Carlyle with some humor, each of them had become famous, “and people. . . sa[id], ‘Both these fellows are from Annandale: Where is Annandale?’” (Carlyle, *Reminiscences* 266).

Irving, the Church of Scotland’s London chaplain, was a popular preacher who eventually became convinced that the spiritual gifts of prophecy and glossolalia had not
ceased with the apostles, but were active in his own congregation. Irving was expelled from the Church of Scotland as a result of his new beliefs, and subsequently helped found the proto-Pentecostal denomination the Catholic Apostolic Church (popularly known as the “Irvingites”). By the time of his early death in 1834, Irving had become uninfluential in his own denomination, and was even briefly officially silenced, due to his failure to possess personally the spiritual gifts whose existence in others he defended. His career was considered by many a tragedy, an example of headstrong folly and wasted talent.

While on the surface, Irving and Carlyle would seem to have little in common, Irving’s attempts to be a public prophet parallel Carlyle’s in a number of significant respects. At Irving’s height, from 1822 to 1828, his sermons went through three editions in a single year, and he regularly preached to a packed crowd including both Coleridge and Prime Minister Canning; he seemed to be the teacher of England (Mulvihill 190-91). Like Carlyle, Irving saw himself as a prophet, and depicted his prophetic authority as derived from his Annandale origins. Irving asserted that the office of the prophet is not “for a time but for all times” and that “The preacher here at home is in no other office than that of the ancient prophet to the land of Israel” (Irving *Collected Works* 433, *Missionaries* xx). Further, Irving held Knox to be the model of the true prophet and insisted that real pastor/prophets were still primarily to be found in rural Scotland, in “the parishes of the North” (Irving *Missionaries* xxiii, cf. Oliphant 184, Lloyd 11). He preached rural Scotland as true Christianity so often that Hazlitt accused him of wishing to “reduce the British metropolis to a Scotch heath” (Hazlitt 53; cf. Franke 58, 38). In many ways, Irving’s model, if at all valid, is a more persuasive—and certainly more straightforward—model of prophetic authority than Carlyle’s, as it retains prophecy’s
origins in the deity in a literal manner. R. A. Story’s biography of Irving’s friend and ministerial associate Robert Story, which Carlyle references in the *Reminiscences*, notes that Irving’s Catholic Apostolic Church claimed divine inspiration for its leaders and divine power to perform miracles (Story 233, Carlyle 233). Carlyle’s famous claim that, if one looks at life from the right point of view, the Age of Miracles is ever here pales before Irving’s claim that his congregation performs actual miracles; Carlyle’s self-consciously singular style of writing pales before the total linguistic singularity of glossolalia. In short, why do we need a Victorian prophet, when we could simply join Irving’s congregation and prophesy?

Irving’s intertextual existence is an immense problem for Carlyle, as Irving has a public claim to everything (Annandale, Scottishness, prophecy, Jane) Carlyle has claimed for his own. Irving was Jane Carlyle’s former love—a matter not explicitly addressed in the *Reminiscences*—and, as the *Reminiscences* do discuss, it was only through Irving that Thomas met Jane. Irving even seems, like Carlyle, to have been drawn to Jane as a metonym of Knox, as he praises to Carlyle her “Pedigree” from “Knox” (Carlyle *Reminiscences* 109). Though few critics note it (and none its full ramifications for the autobiography), Carlyle explicitly states why he is writing the “Edward Irving” section and the audience he hopes to control by it. He writes to assert his ability to control and interpret the public memory of Irving, to correct “in the new theological generation a kind of revival of him, on rather weak and questionable terms, sentimental mainly, and grounded on no really correct knowledge or insight” (Carlyle *Reminiscences* 201).

The primary agent of this “sentimental” revival of Irving is the popular novelist Margaret Oliphant’s sentimental biography *The Life of Edward Irving* (1862), a work
which also narrates Carlyle as a character. Although Oliphant’s literary reputation later improved somewhat, in 1866, at the height of her popularity, she was still generally considered a hack writer, both admired and hated for her ability to speak for “l’homme moyen sensuel” and tendency to avoid “extremes” (Colby 184, cf. Trela 31-32). Oliphant’s *Life of Irving* thus brings together a number of the significant problems for Carlyle’s authority that the *Reminiscences* endeavor to combat. Irving’s very existence threatens Carlyle’s claim to a unique authority, and *The Life of Irving*, a work by a popular author written to please a mass audience, both revives public interest in Irving and narrates and objectifies Carlyle as a character. Though no critic save Amigoni has considered the relation between Oliphant’s *Irving* and Carlyle’s *Irving*, the relationship is both patent and significant. Carlyle had read Oliphant’s work, and appraises it in the *Reminiscences* as “a loyal and clear, but feeble kind of Book, popular in late years” (69).

While Amigoni insightfully sees Oliphant and Carlyle’s works as rival narratives of Irving, even he neglects to consider the works as being, more importantly, rival narratives of Carlyle.

Oliphant revives the story of Irving and his prophetic claims in a work that posits its own mass-market idea of the prophet and judges both Irving and Carlyle by it. Oliphant repeatedly chimes the theme of Irving as prophet, dubbing him, for instance, “The last representative of the ancient prophets” and a “saint and martyr” (260, 427; cf. 14, 41, etc.). However, Oliphant, who accepts neither Irving’s premillennialism nor his belief in the spiritual gifts, can deem Irving a prophet only by idiosyncratically redefining the idea of prophecy. For Oliphant, the prophet’s office is derived not from his ability to speak the truth, but from his self-consistency and his ability to generate pathos in others.
Though Oliphant’s Irving is a prophet “always occupied with the soul of things,” his ideas are frequently false, even “mysterious and often sad enough to the calm looker-on” (231, 268). His connection with the “soul of things” is evidenced not by any of his ideas, but by his self-consistency and his willingness to suffer. A prophet like Irving, Oliphant asserts, “is not always right; may be, in practical necessities, mightily wrong; but is always in a lofty unity with his own conclusions and convictions” (268). Seeking self-consistency instead of material success, Irving “ke[e]p[s] alive the spirit of that sublime impracticable” so crucial to “national and spiritual life” by his willingness to “render up love and life, to break his heart, and end his days in conflict with the shows of things” (Oliphant 231, 291). For Oliphant, the prophet, like the heroes of Greek tragedy, breaks out of the mundaneness of ordinary life and consequently suffers at the hands of the gods, and the prophet’s story, like Greek tragedy, provides its audience with a cathartic experience that ennobles—and in no way threatens—everyday life and established social norms. Since Irving’s seemingly dubious later career and untimely death both generate pathos and show him to be self-consistent to the point of self-destruction, these events—even his silencing—only confirm his status as a prophet (Oliphant 398). Oliphant’s anti-intellectual lack of interest the prophet’s message and sentimental interest in his suffering are best summed up by the melodramatic conclusion of the book, which, treating each term as more or less equivalent, praises Irving as a “true friend and tender heart—martyr and saint” (428).

In Carlyle’s primary appearance in The Life of Irving, he too is subject to depiction in terms of Oliphant’s sentimental, mass market idea of the prophet. In this scene, worried about his friend’s involvement with the tongues affair, Carlyle confronts
Irving. Oliphant writes, perhaps not without a touch of parody of his bombastic language, that Carlyle made “a vehement protestation against the ‘Bedlam’ and ‘Chaos’ to which his friend’s steps were tending which Irving listened to in silence, covering his face with his hands” (342). Carlyle’s ideas, which have not quite gotten into the text, are no sooner referenced than they too are drowned in a shower of pathos and sentiment.

Oliphant continues:

When the philosopher had said, doubtless in no measured or lukewarm terms, what he had to say, the mourning apostle lifted his head, and addressed him with all the tenderness of their youth—’Dear Friend!’—that turning of the other cheek seems to have touched the heart of the sage almost too deeply to make him aware what was the defense which the other returned to his fiery words. (342)

Oliphant’s Irving trumps Carlyle as a prophet by outdoing him in pathos (and, presumably, self-destruction). A heartfelt phrase squashes prophetic insight and even argument itself.

Oliphant also directly contradicts Carlyle’s interpretation of Irving, as put forward in his early essay “The Death of Edward Irving.” In this essay, Carlyle had cast Irving as a noble soul who wanted to make Christianity a reality again, but whose attempts to preserve an outworn faith and, especially, to grasp and retain mass popularity (the “Poison of Popular Applause”) instead led him down the road of “madness” and destruction (“Death” 184). Oliphant summarizes Carlyle’s argument about Irving and then critiques it as follows:

I am as little able to cope with Mr. Carlyle in philosophic insight as I am in personal knowledge; I can only take my appeal to Irving himself. . . . If that record [Irving’s journal] shows any sign of a man whose heart has been caught in the meshes of the social enchantress . . . I am willing to admit that this was the influence that set his mind astray. But if the readers of this history are as unable as myself to perceive any trace of that intoxication—an intoxication too well
known in all its symptoms, and too often seen to be recognized with difficulty—another clue may be reasonably required for this mystery. (212)

To refute Carlyle, Oliphant openly puts herself on an equal plane with the audience (“the readers of this history”) and puts the matter up to a vote to be determined by mass consent. Ironically, she refutes Carlyle’s assertion that listening to the audience killed Irving by polling the audience. Oliphant directly and forcibly subjects both Carlyle and the idea of prophecy to the mass market, a move which may be as great a threat to Carlyle’s authority as her depiction of Irving.

In the margins of Althaus’s biography, Carlyle gives as one of the reasons he is reluctant to write a biography of Irving to correct Oliphant’s that “the readers [would be] mostly questionable, many of them bad” (Althaus 38). However, only by confronting Oliphant and her dubious audience can Carlyle finally free himself from the reign of Demos they embody. Perhaps surprisingly, Oliphant also offers a threat to Thomas’s possession of the perfect audience, Jane Carlyle. Oliphant met Jane Carlyle while working on her book on Edward Irving. As fellow Scottish immigrants and gossips, they hit it off splendidly, and remained friends until Jane’s death. Interestingly, this was a friendship from which Carlyle was self-excluded; Oliphant actually saw Thomas only twice in the course of her five-year friendship with Jane (Trela 33). More disturbingly, Oliphant saw Jane Carlyle alive at a later date than Thomas did. As the Reminiscences mention, “Jane’s last visit before her death” was “two days to Mrs. Oliphant at Windsor” on April 6th and 7th, 1866 (Trela 33, Carlyle Reminiscences 190). Thomas went alone to give the Edinburgh Address, and had not yet returned when Jane died. He is haunted by the fact that he was not there for Jane in the weeks before her death; Oliphant was.
Oliphant’s threat to Carlyle’s possession of Jane as an audience is not just personal, however, but also textual. Jane praised Oliphant’s biography of Irving in extreme terms, and gave Oliphant the somewhat misleading impression that Carlyle loved the work also (Trela 37). In her biography of Irving, who had been both Jane Welsh’s teacher and romantic interest, Oliphant had created a textual Jane Carlyle before Thomas had so. As Carlyle complains in the *Reminiscences*, some of the incidents he wishes to relate about Jane are “already in print, through Mrs. Oliphant’s *Life of Irving*” (*Reminiscences* 69, cf. Oliphant 22).

Finally, Oliphant seems to have known of Jane’s love for Edward Irving, which preceded her love of Carlyle, and, asked by Jane not to speak of such intimate matters in her biography of Irving (Trela 34), penned the following profoundly ambiguous sentence: Despite Jane’s vast faith in Irving and his “indulgent love” for her, “Their intercourse did not have the romantic conclusion it might have been supposed likely to end in; but, as a friendship, existed unbroken through all kinds of vicissitudes: and even through entire separation, disapproval, and outward estrangement, to the end of Irving’s life” (Oliphant 23, emphasis mine). To what extent the public knew of Jane’s affection for Irving, Oliphant was responsible. Oliphant, then, represents a multivalent threat to Carlyle’s authority in the *Reminiscences*, as she has revived Irving, contradicted Carlyle, trivialized prophecy, and narrated Thomas and Jane Carlyle to the amusement of the mass public and, worse, Jane herself.

Irving’s intertextual existence, revived by Oliphant’s book, is a quagmire for Carlyle’s authority in the *Reminiscences*. As Oliphant’s biography had reminded everyone, if Carlyle is a son of Annandale, so is Irving. If Carlyle “was among the last
products” of the Seceder church when it was the last true church, so was Irving (Reminiscences 209, Oliphant 12, cf. Franke 55). If Carlyle was a student of Adam Hope, the ideal teacher, so was Irving (Oliphant 8). In fact, Irving was the better student, introduced to Carlyle’s school class as an example of what the students might, with striving, become (Carlyle Reminiscences 211). Carlyle admits that Irving’s success “had not awakened in [him] any love towards the victorious man,” and would have bred hatred had it not produced “emulation” (Reminiscences 213). Throughout the first part of “Edward Irving,” Irving is the more obvious heir of Annandale. Carlyle even calls him “the natural king” among his young group of friends (Reminiscences 235).

Seven years after seeing Irving in the schoolroom, Carlyle meets Irving for the first time in Edinburgh. Both have been to the university there, and both are preparing to enter the ministry, though Carlyle is doing so with increasing reluctance and doubt. This scene establishes characters for Carlyle and Irving that remain fixed for the course of the narrative. Carlyle is withdrawn, “biliary and intense,” but Irving immediately makes him the center of attention, asking him “a whole series of questions about Annan matters, social and domestic mostly; of which [Carlyle] knew little, and had less than no wish to speak” (Reminiscences 216, 215). Irving’s persistent questions madden Carlyle, who finally snaps at him, “I have had no interest to inform myself about the births in Annan; and care not if the process of birth and generation there should cease and determine altogether!” (Reminiscences 215). In this exchange, Irving quite patently stands for an uncontrollable living, birthing Annandale, and Carlyle for a dead, phantom Annandale. Carlyle’s authority is undermined the moment Irving speaks, as the fossilized and
essentialized Annandale the narrative assumes and Carlyle’s authority requires is besieged with alternate possibilities.

The *Reminiscences* depict Irving from the first in terms that contrast him exactly with the melancholic Carlyle. Irving is compulsively gregarious (cf. Carlyle *Reminiscences* 333, etc.); Carlyle is melancholy, isolated, and secluded. Carlyle, in fact, comments in a famous essay that “But for Irving, I had never known what the communion of man with man means,” an observation that suggests both how dear Irving was to him and how large a threat Irving poses for a literary authority premised on isolation (“Death” 322). To continue these contrasts, Irving is the “sanguine and diffusive,” optimistic and world-loving friend of all (Carlyle *Reminiscences* 216, 265, 238). Carlyle is full of “gloomy prognostications,” sees existence as a “Nightmare-dream,” and is “without friends” (*Reminiscences* 240-42). To restate this contrast in Freudian terms, Irving seems to have no protective shield against stimuli, and seems to be constantly and without discrimination absorbing the external world into himself, while Carlyle seems to be nothing but a protective shield against stimuli, and seems to be, with the sole exception of Irving (and, later, Jane), cutting himself off from the entire external world. Carlyle as narrator explicitly admits that the Irving and Carlyle he has sketched are foils, saying that Irving “almost enjoyed” his “gloomy humours” “as foil to the radiancy of his own sunshine” (*Reminiscences* 275).

As several critics have implied, Carlyle’s validity as a new-style prophet requires that Irving’s old-style prophecy be invalid. Most notably, and most in line with my analysis, Froude sees an “unconscious rivalry” as existing between Irving and Carlyle and Tom Lloyd posits Irving as Carlyle’s early rival, “fictionalized doppelganger” and
“exemplary prophet manqué” (10, 12). Carlyle’s continuity as a self and sage requires that the narrative discredit and dismiss Irving, in terms that suggest the falsity of both Oliphant’s sentimental idea of prophecy and Irving’s Pentecostal model of prophecy, the memory of which Oliphant has revived. If Carlyle cannot directly connect these models of prophecy to Irving’s demise, even Irving’s death and disgrace may not discredit him, but rather show him to be a true prophet, persecuted but faithful to his calling. Oliphant’s narrative would then stand, as Irving’s death shows only that he is a “true friend and tender heart, martyr and saint” (Oliphant 428). Or perhaps Irving’s own last words, made famous by Oliphant’s biography, would prove valid: “If I die, I die unto the Lord. Amen” (Oliphant 426). These statements on the worth of Irving’s life, which discredit apparent success or failure and privilege correspondence to a pattern—sentimental pathos or Christlike suffering—as sources of value, are unanswerable on their own terms; their philosophical terms must be discredited if Carlyle’s authority is to be successfully defended. Otherwise, Carlyle’s authority would remain unconsolidated, as these rival interpretations of prophecy—and, thus, of himself—persist.

As with Jeffrey, Carlyle insists that Irving’s moment of apparent success is actually the moment of his collapse and failure. As Carlyle tells it, once Irving had become a popular preacher, “Crowds of visitors came about him . . . people . . . for the most part, tiresome, ignorant, weak, or even silly and absurd” (Reminiscences 281). As Irving is too “generous” to ignore these weak souls, he comes to enjoy their flattery, failing to realize the variable worth of the currency of public opinion, that “in this liberal London, pitch your sphere one step lower than yourself, and you can get what amount of flattery you will consent to” (Carlyle Reminiscences 288). In the end, Irving’s “endless
patience with the mean people crowding round him” allows the mob to “jostl[e] his life to pieces” (Carlyle *Reminiscences* 292). Irving grows more and more defined, disfigured, and destroyed by his affection for his auditors, then collapses and dies. Carlyle asserts that his own “surlier” and more distrusting character is therefore a boon, for it protects him against the death-by-popularity that Irving met, and which the irritable *Reminiscences* are written to prevent (*Reminiscences* 288).

For Carlyle, Irving’s death and demise reveals, first and foremost, the misguided nature of Oliphant’s vision of the prophetic office. In Carlyle’s account, the Oliphantine Irving, who is a sentimental embodiment of sympathy, tragically distorts his own message because of this sympathy; he is dead as a prophet long before he dies physically. Like Oliphant, Jeffrey, and Disraeli, this Irving writes to please the public, and so discredits himself. Carlyle explicitly relates and rebukes Oliphant’s critique of his essay on Irving, commenting that “Good Mrs. Oliphant and probably her public, have much mistaken me on this point: that Irving to the very last had abundant ‘popularity,’ I knew and know” (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 292). Popularity, however, is no sign of prophetic authority. Carlyle argues against Oliphant that Irving did not want to be merely popular; he wanted to remake civilization along Christian lines, and could not handle it when this dream did not pan out (*Reminiscences* 292). As Carlyle writes, Irving’s reception had at first “seemed more than popularity, and had been nothing more” (*Reminiscences* 291, emphasis Carlyle’s). He could not make the world the “Eden” he desired, and turned towards the apocalypse as a desperate hope that the new world would come anyway (*Carlyle Reminiscences* 317). Carlyle damningly implies both that Irving’s beliefs were a delusion and that Mrs. Oliphant and her “public” are incapable of understanding one who...
speaks with authority, and not like the scribes or scriptors. For Oliphant, there is no authority beyond popularity and so, Carlyle suggests, Oliphant could never be capable of understanding anyone who aspires to prophecy, whether Irving or himself. In the margins of Althaus’s biography of himself, Carlyle complains that despite Oliphant’s book, whose “portraiture” is “not to be called like anywhere,” Irving’s “Biography is not yet known; perhaps never will be” (Althaus 38).

Carlyle is also careful to narrate the scene which comprises his primary appearance in Oliphant’s book, his argument with Irving over the validity of tongue-speaking. Unlike Oliphant’s scene, which was high on pathos and low on intellectual content, the Reminiscences’ version of this argument is a deeply ideological debate. Irving defends his position on the basis of scriptural inspiration itself, the eternal validity of the “13th of Corinthians,” and Carlyle attacks Irving primarily on the grounds that Christianity is “not now well tenable” and that divine revelation is better seen in the world at large than in “an ancient Book” (Reminiscences 339). Irving’s death, then, shows both that truly believing the contents of the Bible will kill you and that Oliphant, in her fog of sentimentalism, had no real understanding of Irving’s beliefs. Carlyle discredits both Oliphant and Irving with this scene and its aftermath. As we might expect, once Carlyle has narrated his primary trauma, the reception of the Edinburgh address, the unperceptive Oliphant also loses Jane Carlyle as an audience; if Jane’s last visit was to Oliphant, Jane’s “last brief thought,” “must have been” of Thomas (Carlyle Reminiscences 191). By reiterating his narrative of popularity as killing Irving, and often depicting Irving in terms reminiscent of Oliphant’s, Carlyle devastatingly critiques
Oliphant’s mass-market narrative and asserts his right of final interpretation over himself and his friend.

With regard to Irving himself, Carlyle suggests that by extending spiritual authority to the people as a mass (as Irvingism, and to a lesser degree, Protestantism in general, tends to do), Christianity actually deprives the legitimate prophet of his just authority. To give the masses a divine authority to speak, rather than simply to receive, a prophetic message is to merely reinstate the problem with popular literature in a capitalist culture, the fluctuating value of author and work. Irving’s explanation of the relation between author and audience sounds quite different from Jeffrey’s or Disraeli’s, but in the end it amounts to the same thing. As a result, Irving cannot hold his own against the mass audience represented by the London crowds, and is first compromised, then overwhelmed by it. Though Irving was a sincere “brave young prophet and reformer,” his effort to play to this crowd caused his speech to be marked by an “unconscious playactorism,” by a touch of stump oratory (Carlyle Reminiscences 229). Irving’s prophecy is a protest against, but does not actually represent an alternate world from, Disraeli’s England.

Irving’s error is especially embodied by his gradual turn to proto-Pentecostalism, the logical end and literal embodiment of the divinely inspired mob. As Carlyle sketches these developments, his horror is palpable. Each stage of Irving’s turn towards an apocalyptic embrace of glossolalia is marked by a new surrender of his authorial authority over his audience. When Irving first becomes obsessed with biblical prophecy, Carlyle is disturbed to find that Irving thinks that the other interpreters of biblical prophecy could “throw any light to [him] on anything whatever”; Carlyle is concerned
that Irving is allowing other, lesser authors a real influence over his life and thought (Reminiscences 318). Further, once the “Gift of Tongues” breaks “out among the crazed weakliest of his wholly rather dim and weakly flock” (Carlyle Reminiscences 338), Irving must consent to whomever is prophesying as to the voice of God. To make matters worse, Irving has “never himself [been] a ‘Tongue’ performer,” and so with his turn to proto-Pentecostalism, he loses not only his authority over his congregation, but even his ability to speak as a full member of this congregation (Carlyle Reminiscences 338). His life henceforth must consist of entire submission to his audience. The end result of Irving’s acceptance of the spiritual gifts is that the prophetic mob renders Irving first “dumb”—by a disciplinary silencing supposedly demanded by the Holy Spirit—and shortly thereafter dead (Carlyle Reminiscences 342). The turn towards tongue-speaking also costs Irving his last credibility with the true audience, Jane Carlyle, who had formerly great esteemed her “spendi[d]” teacher (Carlyle Reminiscences 69). She now feels only “distress, provocation, and a kind of shame” at the thought of him (Carlyle Reminiscences 338). In showing that Irving was destroyed by his own model of prophecy, which in its elevation of the audience resembles both Oliphant’s and Jeffrey’s models, Carlyle has established his right of interpretation over Irving. His authority over and identity versus Irving firmly fixed, the newly omnipotent Carlyle then forces Irving to perform a series of recantations. Irving exits the Reminiscences confessing the falsity of his views and actions, admitting that Carlyle was right about some matters wherein they differed, and lamenting, “I ought to have seen more of T. Carlyle, and heard him more clearly than I have done” (Carlyle Reminiscences 347).
Towards the end of “Edward Irving,” having put his narrative logic fully in place, Carlyle can declare Oliphant’s Irving to be “more or less romantic, pictorial, and ‘not like’ Irving at all (346, emphasis Carlyle’s). Oliphant has a false model of audience, of prophecy, and, as she knows mainly of the later London Irving rather than the earlier Annandale Irving, of Irving himself. As to Irving himself, his fate at the hands of the Christian public shows the illegitimacy of any of the writing that he wrote for this public. The true Irving is entirely Carlyle’s possession; only those who knew the “rustic Annandale” Irving, who wrote nothing, actually understand his story (Reminiscences 346). “Edward Irving” ends with Carlyle’s authority reigning both isolated and unquestioned. He is, as his admirer Alexander Smith wrote in 1866, “a graving tool rather than a thing graven upon—a man to set his mark on the world—a man on whom the world could not set its mark” (391, emphasis Smith’s). Carlyle interprets everything, but no interpretations of him possess validity, and no general models of authorship account for his specific case. “Francis Jeffrey” follows “Edward Irving,” and then “Sundry” follows Jeffrey; by the end, Carlyle has systematically disassociated himself from each of the popular images of himself, and has systematically detached himself from all popular audiences. The trauma of the Edinburgh address’s reception has been narrated and its secondary damages undone, so Carlyle can now close the narrative. He has fashioned a narrative that verifies the basic claims the Reminiscences make about his critical and reader reception:

[A]s for the speaking and criticising multitude, who regulate the paying ditto, I perceive that their labours on me have had a twofold result: Primo. That, after so much nonsense said, in all dialects, and so very little sense, or real understanding of the matter, I have arrived at a point of indifferency towards all that, which is really very desirable to a human soul that will do well; and Secundo . That in
regard to money, and payment etc. in the money kind, it is essentially the same. To a degree which, under both heads (if it were safe for me to estimate it), should say was really a far nearer than common approach to completeness. And which, under both heads, so far as it is complete, means victory, and the very highest kind of ‘success’! (104, emphasis Carlyle’s)

On his own terms, Carlyle has been victorious, and the Reminiscences a success.

I have followed Carlyle’s consolidation of his authority, his regaining of the sage’s authority by reinterpretting his interpreters, through each main account of himself and each main literary figure from whom he must disassociate himself. One problem remains, though. If Carlyle’s defense of his authority is as systematic and as successful as I have suggested, why was the work’s reception so famously bad? No book of its century discredited its author as famously as Carlyle’s Reminiscences. Prior to the publication of the Reminiscences, Carlyle had been a venerated sage. As Broughton notes, by the 1890s “Carlyle” was “shorthand” for a pompous intellectual with a bad marriage (99). It is my assertion that the work was so poorly received because it was successful. The goal of the work is to reject all common audiences and common types of authorship, in order to establish Carlyle’s singularity and fix his value. Carlyle attains some redress versus his interpreters and reduces the threat of popularity by attacking his commentators, readers, and publishers, and by authoring a Carlyle each of them must detest.

With the rise of professionalism—a cultural shift in sources of authority that, as my Wells chapter will show, only becomes more problematic for later sages—the singularity and outsider status on which sage authority rests become in themselves suspect. As my Wells chapter will show, the fissure of knowledge into competing fields is fatal to the sage attempt to interpret the universe as a unified whole; this trend is also a
significant source of the absence of “transcendental” authority that so troubled Carlyle.27

In the Edinburgh Address, interestingly, Carlyle had critiqued one of the early signs of rising professionalism, the tendency to make colleges nothing “more than a cultivating of man in the specific arts” (160).

Because Carlyle in the Reminiscences has established his singularity and rejected his audience, he has, in an increasingly professionalized culture, established his lack of value. While David Masson may have written with respect in 1850 that “There is not . . . a single man connected with the literature of this country, more thoroughly insensible than Mr. Carlyle to the mere titillation of critical opinion,” in a professional culture to behave offensively towards the other members of one’s profession is merely obnoxious (Masson 341). Hence, the initial public outcry over the Reminiscences was over the work’s rudeness, especially its rudeness to other author and celebrities (cf. Broughton 87). Even as early as 1859, reviewers were angrily complaining that Carlyle “seems to think that the line of giants has terminated in himself, and that, in the language of the Psalm—‘There is not us among/A prophet more” and this trend only increased as the years went on (Gillfan 428). James Adams has noted that the Carlylean prophet was from the first a threat to middle class social decorum (25); with the rise of professional culture, the prophet increasingly seems a threat that no longer has to be tolerated. As Trev Broughton writes, “In a sexual-political atmosphere in which the notion of the commonplace was taking on the ideological burden of the normative, the man of letters was in danger of being despoiled of [his] heroic aspect” (17).

The Reminiscences rhetorically succeed but, as their reception testifies, in a thoroughly ironic way. Carlyle has assured that he will not be treated just as a mere
popular author by becoming a gigantic public image for personal failure. Andrew Lang’s review in Fraser’s set the tenor for many of the others, depicting Carlyle as a gifted near-madman, walking the streets and talking to himself (506). We should, Lang suggests, get what good we can out of Carlyle, but remind ourselves that “cakes and ale” have not ceased since the singular, defective, dyspeptic Carlyle could not enjoy them; a common epicureanism is preferable to his heroic stoicism (507). The meaning of this turn in general is perhaps best summed up in John Morley’s Fortnightly Review article on Carlyle, which said that “The self-assertive prophet, it would seem, must give way to the social scientist and the trained professional historian” (qtd. in Gross 104). We must grant Carlyle his due, however; he preferred hatred and mockery, which often meet the prophet’s message, to being treated as a mere popular author, and he avoided the fate he actually feared. The Reminiscences performed the function of a prophetic word; the work—which, as I have shown, repeatedly (and counterfactually) insists that Carlyle is terribly unpopular—proved to be a sign that effects that which it signifies. The reception of the Reminiscences left Carlyle discredited but entirely singular, a creature set apart from the coming democratic age. Having no value, his value is fixed.

1 “James Carlyle” was written in 1832, was a response to the death of Carlyle’s father. “Sir William Hamilton” was written in 1868, as Carlyle’s contribution to a collection of memoirs of the same. “Christopher North” was written in 1868, and was inspired by Carlyle’s composition of “Sir William Hamilton.” Thus, each of the pieces I have omitted was conceived in significantly different circumstances from the rest of the Reminiscences. On the dates and circumstances of the composition of these sections, see the Oxford edition of the Reminiscences, pgs. xxiii, 3, 410-11.

2 James Adams perceptively notes the dilemma of the Carlylean hero, who is not allowed to think about his audience, but, needing a hero worshipper, must have an audience (38 ff.). My analysis here could be considered to be an extension of his argument, as he does not take the discussion past this paradox.

3 The popular author’s condition is one which Patrick Brantlinger considers a universal problem for nineteenth-century authors. As authors of the Romantic era and after acutely sensed, to publish a book on the public market is to become thrall to the “unknowable[e]” “common reader” and to thereby subject one’s value to fluctuation, uncertainty, and indeterminacy (cf. Brantlinger Reading 16-17). With regard to
Carlyle’s rule over his audience, I should note that I am aware of, but take issue with, Margaret Rundle’s assertion that the early Carlyle believed in the need for “reader/writer cooperation” and held to a fundamentally dialogical idea of authorship (116). She asserts that Carlyle turns to his model of the isolated prophet only in his later years (114). However, her examples of dialogism—the prophet’s need for a “receptive audience” and the “intelligence” that audience must possess to be receptive (116, 114)—themselves reveal the audience relation as hierarchical and monological rather than democratic and dialogical. The audience’s only task is to listen.

4 On the predestined character of some to rule (in this case, write) and some to be ruled (in this case, read) see the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, in which Carlyle deems it one of the most pressing tasks of the present day to determine “Who is slave, and eternally appointed to be governed; who free, and eternally appointed to govern.” The answer to this question, he adds, is “settled in Heaven” and cannot be altered (“Parliaments” 211). As Amigoni notes, Carlyle sees an historical precedent for this model of audience in Cromwell’s “dictatorship of the elect,” a small cordon of predestined, holy men who entirely submitted to a hero’s rule and thereby changed the course of English history (*Victorian* 66). On the difference between apparent demand and real demand, see Carlyle’s observation with regard to English politics: “Many men vote; but in the end you will infallibly find, none counts except the few who were in the right” (“Parliaments” 208).

5 Carlyle’s models of audience seem to be, in some ways, more confrontational versions of the strategies Patrick Brantlinger sees Victorian novelists as employing to avoid facing the mass nature of their audience. Brantlinger sees, especially, the Victorian novel’s use of direct address as a means of envisioning a single reader with definable traits as the book’s recipient, rather than an indefinable mob (*Reading* 15).

6 On the inability of a democratic election to ever produce a true result see also the *Latter-Day Pamphlets:* “There are fools, cowards, knaves, and glutonous traitors true only to their own appetite, in immense majority, in every rank of life; and there is nothing frightfuller than to see these voting and deciding” (“Jesuitism” 256).

7 In this fear, Carlyle is the heir of the English Romantics, “the first [authors] to become radically uncertain of their readers” (qtd. in Brantlinger *Reading* 15).

8 The *Reminiscences* discuss even Carlyle’s own public lectures, particularly *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, in a very ambivalent manner. Carlyle believes that in these lectures he largely told the truth and spoke as a prophet, but that to some extend the medium betrayed the message, causing the final product to be a “detestable mixtures of Prophecy and Play-actorism” (*Reminiscences* 97).

9 Cf. Van Oosterom’s discussion of Carlyle’s “clear anxiety” about sharing his life with the public in any way at all (247). John Clubbe aptly notes the “paradox” of Carlyle’s “hostility . . . toward the prospect of anyone writing” his biography, but makes no attempt to himself explain this paradox (19).

10 Carlyle had long distrusted the active reader as an insult to the writer. See, for instance, his comment in the early essay “Characteristics,” that Sterne’s wish for a reader “that would give up the reigns of his imagination into his author’s hands, and be pleased he knew not why, and cared not wherefore; might lead him a long journey now” in the age of reviewing, dominated by “mere [book] taster[s]” (282, emphasis Carlyle’s).

11 Carlyle is quoting his own translation of Goethe.

12 See for instance the letters of April 3-13, 1866 in Trudy Bliss’ *Thomas Carlyle: Letters to His Wife*, which mention following the reception in the *Scotsman* and *Punch*, and the letters of the same dates in *Letters and Memorials*, which mention following the reception in these two papers, as well as in *Pall Mall Gazette*, other unnamed newspapers, and the introduction to the bootlegged address (Carlyle *Letters* 386-90; Welsh Carlyle *Letters* 289-97).

13 The paucity of biographical material on Carlyle at this time is witnessed by the comments of Althaus, the author of one of the two 1866 biographies of Carlyle, concerning the difficulty of obtaining reliable biographical information on Carlyle, especially where his younger years are concerned (3-4).

14 Froude’s introduction to the original edition of the *Reminiscences* asserts that the “Jane Welsh Carlyle” section is a “long narrative, or fragment of a narrative” intended to serve as “the introduction to Mrs. Carlyle’s letters” (qtd. in Campbell Introduction xxiv). David Amigoni notes that “The *Reminiscences* are intertextually complex, a densely fashioned set of memoirs with echoes that allude to other cognate writings,” especially “Carlyle’s commentary to the *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle,*” in which Carlyle relates a number of incidents also narrated in the *Reminiscences* (“Gendered Authorship”).
To mention only the more major incidents, Carlyle’s notes retell, his own last meeting with Irving, Mill’s accidental destruction of the French Revolution manuscript, the construction of the soundproof room in the Chelsea house, Jane’s series of illnesses, and the composition of many of Carlyle’s major works (*The French Revolution, Oliver Cromwell, Latter-Day Pamphlets, and Frederick the Great* (Letters and Memorials vol. I 1-2, 6, 8, 209, 249; vol. II 16-17, 70-71, 207-10).

Van Oosterom notes, without elaborating on the point, that Carlyle produced the *Reminiscences* under “pressure from widely inaccurate biographers” (248). Broughton’s comments (echoing Andrew Lang) about late-nineteenth century biography and autobiography in general also seem relevant. Carlyle, like most male biographers and autobiographer of his time, suffers from an “attenuated . . . sense of self-determination” and a “‘general sense of injury’” brought on by the existence of “potential and actual rivals for the ‘truth,’” by the “disruptive effects of ‘other’ voices” (Broughton 30, 29).

As Amigoni insightfully observes, Carlyle stresses his Annandale origins and language as a way of parodying “the metropolitan liberal intelligentsia” (“Displacing” 128). Vanden Bossche’s observation that the *Reminiscences* depend partly on the contrast between Scotland and England—Jeffrey and Irving succumb to the influence of London and die, only Carlyle is true to Scotland and lives—is also insightful and useful (164). He does not extensively develop this observation, however.

Carlyle’s treatment of “the Scotland of the past as a realm of undying value precisely because it is so far removed from the Cheap and Nasty of the present” has been noted by a number of critics (Carlisle 37, Lloyd 10). These observations are rarely synthesized into any larger picture of how Carlyle’s authority or the rhetoric of the *Reminiscences* works, however. One of the principal shortcomings of scholarship on the *Reminiscences* is that very few, if any critics attempt to explain the whole of the work rather than a section or two.

Landow explicitly identifies the “priest” or pastor as the primary teacher of traditional wisdom (*Elegant* 23-24). His identification of the teacher as a wisdom figure is more implicit. Landow, quoting Morton Bloomfield, asserts that traditional wisdom is that which we “teach” our “children,” which implies that professional teachers of children possess an important role in passing along this wisdom (*Elegant* 22).

Even the one exception to the early biographies’ generally genial portrayal of the Jeffrey/Carlyle relationship is quite minimized in these works. Though both Ballantyne and Shepherd’s early biographies note Carlyle’s late 1820s fight with Jeffrey over the merits of Goethe, they minimize the conflict by stressing that Jeffrey always praised the translator of Goethe, even if he did not praise the work translated (Ballantyne 10, Shepherd 17).

Tom Lloyd’s observation that “Irving was a consistent standard against which Carlyle defined his identity” is also relevant, though less precise (12).

Van Oosterom writes that Carlyle’s critique of Oliphant’s Irving could be “perceptive analysis” or “a judgment influenced by petty jealousy on a subject [Irving] Carlyle regarded dear and as his own” (258). Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on this insightful observation.

I will not consider the reception of the *Reminiscences* with regard to Carlyle’s marital problems or sexual virility. This controversy was sparked by Froude’s biographies rather than by the *Reminiscences* themselves (though it was later read back into the *Reminiscences*) (see Broughton 87-88). I am looking at how autobiographies attempt to capture the narratives of earlier biographies; how they relate to the narratives offered by later biographies is outside my purview.

Here I should note that Carlyle’s idea of the self-enclosed heroic author obviously, as many others have noted, corresponds with the Victorian ideal of masculinity as reserve and even with what Boughton calls
Carlyle’s “muscular celibacy” (Broughton 145). James Adams’s analysis of Carlyle conceptions of masculinity, which foil the hero, who disregards others’ opinions, with the strictly performative, insubstantial dandy is also relevant (Adams 21-22). Carlyle’s concern to avoid attaching his self to any object could easily be seen as connected with these concepts. I have failed to pursue this line of inquiry not because I disagree with it, but because “textual reserve” and the fear of “textual penetration,” if you will, seemed to provide more meaningful ways to discuss the dynamics of authority in the Reminiscences than manly reserve or fear of sexual penetration would have provided.

27 On Carlyle and transcendental authority, see the opening chapter of Vanden Bossche, esp. pgs. 1-5.
CHAPTER 3

“ABOVE THE INFLUENCES OF CHANCE AND NECESSITY”:
NEWMAN’S DEVELOPMENT AS SELF AND SAGE IN HIS APOLOGIA AND
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

I: The Idea of a Sage: Newman’s Philosophy and the Necessity and Disaster of Tract 90

If Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*, with their acute awareness of the ways in which the sage’s authority is threatened by any public discussion of the particulars of his life story, most clearly identifies the basic rhetorical issues involved in the sage autobiographical project, John Henry Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* most transparently reveals the intertextual trauma that triggers the sage autobiography’s composition. Even many people who have never read the *Apologia* are familiar with the narrative of its production: Charles Kingsley’s attack on Newman in *Macmillan’s* for teaching that “truth, for its own sake” is not a “virtue,” the angry exchange of pamphlets that followed, Newman’s determination to write an autobiography to vindicate his commitment to the cause of truth, and his restoration in the cultural pantheon following the work’s public success (qtd. in Newman *Mr. Kingsley and Dr. Newman* 247). In the *Apologia*, the first (1864) and critically foremost work of its kind, the anxieties that triggered the work’s production
are openly on display—most patently, all critical editions of the work include in an appendix the attack that was the direct occasion of its production.

However, while the *Apologia’s* direct occasion, Newman’s quarrel with Kingsley, is well known, the epistemological foundations of this quarrel are rarely discussed, and Newman’s quarrels with foes other than Kingsley usually escape critical notice.¹ Kingsley, an amateur naturalist and popularizer of Darwin, attacks Newman and narrates Newman’s life from the standpoint of Victorian empiricism. Newman’s view of the universe as a unified whole that can be interpreted only with difficulty by a systematic act of close reading is typical of the sage discourse, but strikes Kingsley and other partisans of empiricism as sheer sophistry, for it defies the common Victorian belief in the self-interpreting nature of facts. To the empiricists, Newman is a master sophist, loyal to no one and nothing beyond himself and his own will, disloyal even to his Catholic superiors and to the nature of reality itself.

Newman also faces both praise and critique on grounds opposite to those of the empiricists. He is attacked in works like Elizabeth Harris’s *From Oxford to Rome* as a slave in thrall to the Church of Rome; Harris, among others, envisions a Newman who renders servile, mindless obedience to his superiors and who has given up the right to think for himself. He is also praised for these same characteristics by his superior, Nicholas Cardinal Wiseman, who in his essays narrates Newman’s life as one of submissive obedience to those in authority. As was the case with Kingsley’s view of Newman, Harris’s and Wiseman’s picture of Newman is derived from a culturally prominent epistemological method—in this case, deductive logic, the mode of reasoning preferred both by the Victorian Catholic Church and Anglo-Catholic movement. In this
view, Newman upon his conversion ceases to be a highly idiosyncratic and individual thinker and is instead absorbed into a syllogism: to be a Catholic is to submit one’s judgment to the divinely ordained ecclesiastical hierarchy; Newman has become a Catholic; therefore, Newman no longer possesses independent judgment. The rhetorical bind in which these attacks place Newman—if he refutes the charge of sophistry, he seems to grant the charge of intellectual subservience; if he refutes the charge of subservience, he seems to grant the charge of sophistry—is thus a metaphysical bind as well. Caught between the charges of subservience and sophistry, Newman is also caught between the epistemological methods of empiricism and logical deduction. Newman in 1864 is interpreted in the terms of rival epistemologies far more often than he is interpreted in terms of his own system and, consequently, he cannot function effectively as an all-interpreting sage.

Newman’s *Apologia* is an attempt to narrate himself within the terms of his own philosophical system while escaping this rhetorical and metaphysical double-bind. As the work’s title suggests, Newman quickly turns Kingsley’s attack on himself into a literary trial, and his autobiography into his defense. He uses the scenario of the trial to establish documentary evidence as the only reliable standard for judging his guilt or innocence with regard to the charges that Kingsley and others have made against him. Newman’s appeal to the rhetoric of the trial (a seemingly unremarkable and fairly conventional rhetorical appeal, as he has in fact been publicly accused of a public offense) plays the unexpected and deeply important role of authorizing the *Apologia*’s highly unusual structure. Alone among major Victorian autobiographies, the *Apologia* is not as much a conventional chronological narrative of Newman’s life as it is an anthology
of extracts from Newman’s letters and published writings that is woven together into a continuous whole by means of a virtuoso series of interpretive commentaries. The work’s structure thus mirrors Newman’s idea of the economy, in which truth is intertextual and interdisciplinary—the cumulative set of interrelations between a widely varying set of texts and ideas—as well as rhetorical—a series of relations that, to be comprehended, must be simplified and carefully directed at a given audience. The Apologia as a narrative also possesses a markedly existential streak, as it painstakingly narrates the motives and decisions of a protagonist who inhabits a world that possesses no clear meaning. Neither the rationalist nor the empiricist attacks on Newman have meaning in the context of the Apologia, in which individual facts do not possess isolated, self-evident meaning, and logic does not necessarily lead to truth. More than any other sage, Newman embeds in the very structure of his autobiography the metaphysical assumptions of his system; perhaps for this reason, Newman’s autobiography is the most critically successful of the sage autobiographies. One can argue with the book only by ceasing to read it.

However, if we are to understand the threats to Newman’s authority that the Apologia attempts to contain, we must first understand the basic premises of Newman’s philosophical system. At the basis of Newman’s thought lies a keen awareness that the subjective human position prevents anything from being known with complete objectivity or surety (Mitchell 243). A self-professed Berkeleyian, he held that because the causation of our sense perceptions cannot be attributed to external objects without an instinctive act of interpretation, even the existence of the material world cannot be proven with certainty, and must be taken on faith (Dupré 141, Newman Grammar 67, Arians 75).
Further, Newman held that meaning is not inherent but contextual; all facts (and texts) must be interpreted in relation to each other and take on meaning only in the context of this hermeneutic relation (cf. Newman *Idea* 124 and esp. *Idea* 43, 46-48; on texts, see Newman *Letter to Pusey* 139 and Myers 107). As Newman writes in *The Idea of a University*, “Truth means facts and their relations,” and “Knowledge is the apprehension of these facts, whether in themselves, or in their mutual positions and bearings” (42, 43, emphasis mine). As I shall later discuss at length, Newman’s premise that facts and texts must be understood essentially semiotically, through a complicated reading in relation to innumerable other facts and texts, destabilizes the common mid-Victorian epistemology of the self-interpreting fact and renders meaning generally uncertain. For Newman, since the “Human mind cannot take in this whole vast fact [the universe]” simultaneously, and cannot know all of the “countless relations” of individual facts “one towards another,” the human mind cannot know the full, contextual meaning of any fact (*Idea* 42-43).³ Lacking the total, universal context necessary to establish the meaning—or even range of meanings—of anything, human knowledge is, at best, “probabilistic” (Newman *Callista* 97, Newman *Grammar* 226, Jaki 259-60). Newman considers even the validity of logic to be doubtful. To reason logically, we must posit a set of unprovable operating assumptions (dubbed by Newman “first principles”) from which to reason, a difficulty that makes all logic to some degree circular (Newman *Grammar* 66, 185-87). In one of the grimmer observations of any mid-Victorian thinker, Newman proclaims, “My ideas are all assumptions, and I am ever moving in a circle” (Newman *Grammar* 272; cf. Newman *Development* Longmans ed. 107, Schmidt 10).
Despite his basic skepticism, Newman is no nihilist, however. He is closer to Kierkegaard than to Nietzsche in his interpretation of the uncertainty of human existence, and his existential elements have long been noted by philosophers and literary critics alike (cf. Macquarrie 86-87, Levine *Boundaries* 181). Newman faces the incertitude of human knowledge with what amounts to a leap of faith. Given that people must act in order to live, that grounds are required to prompt and justify actions, and that intellectual certainty is unattainable, we must assume where we cannot know and take the leap of faith of acting on the basis of these assumptions. As Newman succinctly puts it: “life is for action”; “to act you must assume, and that assumption is faith” (“Tamworth” 206). If we grant that we *must* come to conclusions in uncertain matters, it is reasonable to assume that we *can* reach accurate conclusions about uncertain matters, and futile to assume otherwise.

On this foundation, Newman rejects the narrow rationalism and empiricism that had dominated European thought since the Enlightenment. If, he reasons, all initial operating premises are assumptions, then it follows that the methodological doubt on which post-Cartesian rationalism is premised is also an assumption, and “of all assumptions the greatest,” as it condemns the mind that posits it (Newman *Grammar* 294). In a line of reasoning that seems to have influenced Chesterton, Newman argues that since the human mind is the only tool we have we have with which to reason, it is not terribly meaningful to critique—like Kant, Descartes, or Locke—human understanding on the basis of an abstract “ideal of how the human mind ought to act”; we must accept our “faculties, as [we] have them,” if we are to think at all (Newman *Grammar* 139-40, 153). As Newman observes, “If I do not use myself, I have no other self to use. My
only business is to ascertain what I am, in order to put it to use” (Newman *Grammar* 273).

Newman proposes that since the methodological doubt of rationalism is a dead end as a first principle, then methodological belief should be the starting point of human thought (Newman *Grammar* 187). For instance, if we assume that the human mind works, it is also reasonable to assume that the beliefs that have been held by virtually all human cultures are, though unprovable, true. Since the human beliefs that the material universe has objective existence, that the world possesses a meaning, that the individual life possesses a meaning, and that a deity is the origin of the world’s and individual’s existence and meaning are all equally universal, equally instinctual, and equally unprovable, to reject one belief is to reject them all, and it is most reasonable to accept all (Newman *Grammar* 68, 106-7, 272, *Apologia* 156-57; Dupré 142-43; cf. Rule 248).

Given the futility of methodological doubt, we should “begin with believing everything that is offered to [our] acceptance” from any received means of knowing, whether reason, empirical evidence, tradition, authority, or imagination; then, we should slowly refine our beliefs through careful, recursive, imaginative comparisons between our received knowledge and whatever new empirical evidence, reasoning, and opinions we encounter (Newman *Grammar* 294, Newman *Development* Longmans ed. 103, *Apologia* 161-62; Tillman 46-48). To this anti-Cartesian and anti-reductive model of human thought, which stresses experience and analogy and de-emphasizes absolute proof and system, Newman gives the names the “illative sense” (when discussed as a human capacity) and “informal inference” (when discussed as an abstract concept) (Schmidt 9, Robinson 157, Newman *Grammar* 269). And so, Newman suggests, if we approach the whole of human
thought with the “state of mind” of belief, from an “accumulation of various probabilities . . . we may construct legitimate proof, sufficient for certitude” (Newman Grammar 320-21). Newman explains how this difficult construction project is best accomplished in *The Idea of a University*.

As Newman considers probability to be an inescapable element of human knowledge that is not to be fought but accepted, *The Idea of a University* is particularly an attempt to deal with the difficulty posed by the contextual nature of meaning. Newman begins by critiquing the rising scientific specialists—the physical scientists and “scientific historians” who often based their authority on the self-interpreting fact, usually saw each intellectual field as an end in itself, and who, consequently, ardently opposed the liberal education *The Idea of a University* so passionately defends—in light of the semiotic nature of meaning. Newman suggests that like individual facts, individual fields and models of knowledge are but “partial views or abstractions” in relation to a larger reality, and consequently only deceive the inquirer if viewed in isolation from the whole (Newman *Idea* 43, 45, 47-49, 256-57, cf. Holloway 160). The “conclusions [of any discipline] do not represent whole and substantive things, but views [attempted systemizations of impressions], true so far as they go,” a limit that can be determined only in relation to the conclusions of other disciplines (Newman *Idea* 45-46, cf. 68, 56-57). Consequently, despite “the tendency of physicists ‘to take their formulas for [Divine] fiats,’” the conclusions of any discipline “cannot be considered as simple representations or informants of things as they are” (Newman *Idea* 46, qtd. in Jaki 253). Even the dominant scientific materialism, as it isolates the empirical from other modes of
knowing, is only a “partial” and more or less distorted interpretation of reality (Newman
Idea 70, 360; Helmling 28).

Newman exemplifies the corrective relations between the disciplines especially
by the relation between natural science and theology. For reasons I will later discuss at
more length, Newman, like many nineteenth-century thinkers, sees theology as a
deductive science and natural science as an inductive science (Newman Idea 202). Due
to their differing subject matters and methodologies, theology and natural science should
never come into conflict (as there is virtually no legitimate overlap between them), but
for the same reason the conclusions of each discipline are limited in validity (Jaki 257,
Newman Idea 389, cf. Newman Idea 204). Natural science can tell us about matter or
immediate causes, but lacks the means to inform us about spirit, mind, or ultimate causes,
and if extrapolated into these realms yields only false conclusions (Jaki 217, Newman
Idea 394, cf. Callista 9-11). Conversely, theology can tell us much about the spirit,
mind, and ultimate causes, but lacks the means to inform us about material facts, concrete
situations, or immediate causes, and if extrapolated into these realms yields only false
conclusions (Newman Idea 48-49). An ideal, and seemingly impossible, synthesis of
natural science with theology (and with all other disciplines) is necessary if we are to
determine to what extent the propositions of these disciplines conform to reality, and to
what extent they are true only in the abstract (Newman Idea 49, 357-59). Neither natural
science, though it seems irrefutable, nor theology, “though it comes from heaven,” is
simply true (Newman Idea 49).

There is a more hopeful side to Newman’s insistence on the contextual nature of
meaning, however. In the words of John Holloway, Newman believed that “nothing in
the created universe is self-contained” because “reality is a great ordered system with the creator as its apex” (159, emphasis Holloway’s). When pieces or modes of knowledge are approached in isolation, they become meaningless. Unsynthesized information is meaningless and bears no relation to real understanding (Newman Idea 122-23). By contrast, the attempt to synthesize all knowledge into one whole, though ultimately unachievable, mirrors the mind of God (from whom all meaning derives), and attempts to do justice to the contextual nature of meaning. In an elaborate and recursive process of adjustment, we can revise and refine our assumptions—the “antecedent probabilities” with which in Newman’s methodological belief we must begin any analysis—in light of new knowledge, and interpret and understand new knowledge in light of what we already know (cf. Jost Rhetorical Thought 41). Although we can never know the total context necessary to have objectively certain and complete knowledge of anything, by amassing as complete a set of interdisciplinary and intertextual relations as possible, we can come to serviceable approximations of truth that, as in a mathematical limit, close in ever closer upon though they never quite reach their ideal goal (Helmling 140). With regard to the individual or collective mind, Newman terms this process “growth” (the dominant theme of his two novels, Loss and Gain and Callista); with regard to the ideas approximated, Newman terms this process “development” (the dominant theme of An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine). The apex of this process occurs when “viewed altogether, they [the intellectual disciplines, or “sciences”] approximate to a representation or subjective reflection of the objective truth, as nearly as is possible to the human mind, which advances towards the accurate apprehension of that object, in
proportion to the number of sciences which it has mastered” (Newman Idea 44-45, Grammar 57-58; cf. Marsden 303-4).

This “representation or subjective reflection of the objective truth”—which, though it increases in accuracy, will never be simply true and which, even in the earliest human attempts at synthesizing knowledge, was never simply false—is dubbed by Newman “the economy” (cf. Newman Apologia 34). Newman holds that since the full truth is both unknowable to human minds and inexpressible in human language, truth must be expressed in a partial, “analogous,” and historically specific manner if it is to be meaningful in a human context (Newman Arians 44-45, 72, Jost “Philosophic Rhetoric” 73). As the term “economy” suggests, human truth is rhetorical, expressed in (and limited by) the terms, concepts, and modes of knowing accepted and understood by a particular audience (Schmidt 8, Jost Rhetorical Thought 10). Further, if distortion and confusion are to be kept to an inevitable modicum, portions of the truth that an audience could not possibly understand must be suppressed or minimized, an aspect of the economy that Newman, after the Church Fathers, calls the Disciplina Arcani (Arians 65).

In one of his most controversial essays, Newman writes that even Catholic dogma is decreed with reference to an audience. He observes that the Pope’s “[dogmatic] definition is not made without a previous reference to what the faithful will think of it and say to it” and that the likely reaction of the laity determines whether a doctrine is utterable at a given time (Newman “On Consulting the Faithful” 394, 404). According to Newman, divine revelation itself is economical, for the books of the Bible and the doctrines of the Church are “condescensions to the infirmities and peculiarities of our minds,” “shadowy representations” of “incomprehensible realities” to those who think
terms of “parts and whole, means and object” (Newman *Arians* 75). The myriad phenomena of the material world express the plan of God through an economy not easily discerned and, as I have already suggested, the best of human thought is also economical in nature (Newman *Arians* 75, Myers 107). Newman’s denial of the independent, self-existent nature of truth or facts, it should be noted, also well fits his Berkeleyism; for Newman as for Berkeley, nothing exists without an audience.

Since in the Economy, truth is always partial, historically conditioned, and in process, for Newman the world possesses an infinite amount of meaning, but no text or fact possesses a single, fixed, objective meaning (Helmling 104). Prefiguring many poststructuralist literary critics, Newman observes that when an exegete attempts to assign a “single,” “literal,” self-consistent meaning to each passage in a text, he or she will inevitably—though often unintentionally—end by undermining the idea that the text as a whole possesses a unified, coherent meaning (Newman *Development Image* ed. 260-69, cf. 304). As Lemoine notes, for Newman “le sens plénir” of scripture transcends both literal meaning and authorial intention, and it is precisely this plenitude of meaning that permits scripture to serve, in the hands of an adept interpreter, as a key to all reality past and present (Lemoine 51, 54, Newman *Development* Longmans ed. 95-98, On *Inspiration* 116-17). By contrast, the scientific materialist picture of reality, like the Higher Critical understanding of the Bible, is the result of a literalist misreading and dissection of a text that should be read as a series of multivalent, interconnected tropes (cf. Helmling 54, Schramm 180). Newman observes, “There are two ways . . . of reading Nature—as a machine and as a work,” and the scientists have simply chosen the wrong model of reading (“Tamworth” 210, cf. *Idea* 360; Helmling 28). In sum, only if the
universe is read as whole, as a multilayered and multivalent but ultimately unified work written by God—a mode of reading that Newman admits must be taken on faith and cannot be established as inevitable or inherently necessary—can anything be said to truly possess meaning.

Like most of the other sages, Newman assigns the task of holding human knowledge together as a unified whole to an ideal thinker in many ways resemblant to himself. The function that Victorianists associate with the sage Newman assigns to the philosopher, a title he did in fact apply to himself. The philosopher “in the true sense of the word” holds together all knowledge as a coherent “whole” through his keen “comprehension of the bearings of one science on another, and the use of each to each, and the location and limitation and adjustment and due appreciation of them all, one with another” (Newman *Idea* 48, 124). The philosopher is, in short, both the ideal Liberal Educator and the “arbiter of all truth” (Newman *Idea* 82). Foreshadowing H. G. Wells’s insistence that, if human knowledge is to comprise a meaningful whole, an age of specialization requires a specialist in generalizing, Newman deems the task relating the various specialisms to each other to be a specialism of its own: “a sort of science distinct from all of them, and in some sense a science of sciences,” an “architectonic science” (Newman *Idea* 48, 82, 122).

The figure of the ideal philosopher helps to clarify several important aspects of Newman’s thought. Since the work of the ideal philosopher is a work of intellectual synthesis that can be confined to the terms and standards of no one intellectual discipline or method, this “architectonic science” appears to be the apex and formalization of Newman’s own unsystematic and “architectonic [reasoning] faculty,” the “illative sense”
(Newman *Grammar* 269). In light of his definition of philosophy, we can best understand the Catholic Newman’s otherwise puzzling assertion that he is not a theologian; by disclaiming theology and professing philosophy, Newman eschews the limits of the deductive method and claims for himself the task of systematizing reality into a single framework (cf. Lash 23, Newman “Advertisement” v). Finally, this figure of the ideal philosopher, by means of which Newman sought to prevent the breakdown of metaphysical meaning, is reflected in a textual register by the figure of the inspired editor, by means of which Newman sought to prevent the breakdown of biblical meaning. Against both traditionalist Christians (who professed the verbal inspiration of Scripture) and the Higher Critics of the Bible (who held that the patchwork origins of the biblical books disproved scriptural inspiration altogether), Newman asserted that much of Scripture was compiled by “inspired editor[s]” who, through judicious and unerring selection, combination and revision, turned fallible, disparate, fragmented texts into the infallible word of God (Newman *Inspiration* 101-2, 120-122; Schramm 156). Newman was himself a famous editor, and the similarity of his editorial and philosophical ideals should be plain.

In keeping with his interdisciplinary emphasis, Newman most frequently supports his readings of the world by an appeal to ecclesiastical history, a subject combining history, theology, philosophy, and literature. As for Carlyle, for Newman history serves as a means of objecting to scientific empiricism without condoning Romantic subjectivism. Neither in the province of straight empiricism nor in the province of straight deduction, history, more openly than other disciplines, requires the assumption of antecedent probabilities, open acts of interpretation, and the valuing and weighing of
authorities (Lash 25-26, Biener 153-54, 160, Newman Development Longmans ed. 103). For Newman, even the scientific historian’s stance of neutral objectivity with regard to historical facts is simply an interpretive stance or antecedent probability; with regard to ecclesiastical history, this stance is simply the philosophical assumption of materialism, the refusal to read events as possessing a sacramental or symbolic meaning, and the silencing of historical witnesses who profess events to have an interior, divine meaning (Lash 28-29, Biener 157-58, 160-62). True history, for Newman as for Carlyle, is not an objective series of facts but an existential dialogue between the past and the present that openly acknowledges the subjective position of the interpreter and the difficult and fragmentary nature of the dialogue (Jost Rhetorical Thought 108-9, cf. Newman Development Longmans ed. 7). Through this dialogue the facts of history attain the meaning that a false pretense of “objectivisme scientifique” would deny them, and an outline of God’s economic self-revelation in history is discerned (Biener 160).

Newman considers the “central truth” of Christianity to be the incarnation, the idea that God entered history at a particular point, connecting the finite with the infinite, the human with the divine, the conditionally meaningful world with an inherently meaningful God (Development Image ed. 290). The incarnation is the ultimate model for, and guarantor of the validity of, the economy, as in the incarnation infinite God emptied himself and condescended to take on finite human form in order to communicate with humanity in human terms. In a word, in the incarnation, God “economized” himself. For Newman, as inversely for Derrida, all meaning depends on a Transcendental Signified located both inside and outside language and thought. In keeping with Newman’s emphasis on the incarnation, the key era of ecclesiastical history for Newman
is the AnteNicene and Conciliar era (c. 200-787 A.D.), when, through a series of highly contentious and politically charged inner-church quarrels, the central Christological doctrines were shaped and then, through a series of fractious, philosophically recondite, and often chaotic church councils, authoritatively defined (cf. Newman Development Longmans ed. 56, 63). By painstakingly sorting through its myriad arguments, textual artifacts, and minutiae, Newman posits a coherent meaning for this complicated and controversial epoch.

Since in this era the heart of Christian orthodoxy was defined, by positing a meaning for the Conciliar period Newman also thereby posits a coherent, unified meaning for Christianity as it has come to exist and, implicitly, for the world that incarnation was intended to redeem (cf. Biener 162). As the Neo-Platonic Fathers of the Alexandrian Church played a key role in the development of incarnational theology, Newman’s researches into early church history also encourage his tendencies towards philosophical realism (Lash 48, Newman Apologia 34). In his first book, Arians of the Fourth Century (1832), Newman writes the history of this epoch, and in his most influential early work, The Via Media (1837), he reads Anglicanism in light of this history, defending the Anglican Church on the grounds that, the heir of the Church of earlier ages through Apostolic succession, it also possesses a more substantial theological likeness to the Church of the Fathers than do either the Protestant churches or the Church of Rome. Much later in life, he reflected that throughout his intellectual career he had “taken [his] stand upon the Fathers” and had not “budge[d]” (Newman Letter to Pusey 23).
As I have suggested, I see the autobiographies of sage figures as attempts to recoup the sages’ authority following blows to their textually constructed authorial selves, blows analogous to Freudian trauma in their unexpected onset, damage to internal coherence, and disruption of the individual’s ongoing life narrative. As I have shown in the case of Carlyle, this trauma occurs when the sage stakes a position that is logically required by his own philosophical system, but that the public and critics receive in a manner for which he cannot account in the terms of his system. This statement’s dramatic, distinct failure in reception, its inability to function as a prophetic word and enact what it enunciates, then becomes an undisputed fact that serves both as evidence for rival interpretations of the sage’s work and life and as a seemingly intractable obstacle to the sage’s interpretation of his own life and work. As in Freudian trauma’s account of the actual self, the textual self’s unity is disrupted by an unanticipated textual event that violates the terms of its self-narrative so radically as to defy coherent or definitive retelling.

The text that marks Newman’s initial loss of control over his own work is Tract 90. Tract 90 was his reading of the authoritative creed of the Anglican Church, the Thirty-Nine Articles, with the aim of showing that these articles could be reconciled with the beliefs of late classical and medieval Christianity, such as prayer for the dead and the infallibility of ecumenical councils. In the terms of Newman’s philosophy as I have sketched it, Tract 90 was intellectually necessary. The Thirty-Nine Articles were seen as the charter of the Church of England as a Protestant church, the mark of its division from the corrupt Catholic church of the era of Constantine and thereafter (cf. Lowe 23, Bricknell 4-5). Given Newman’s treatment of the era of the great Christological councils
as a touchstone for historic Christianity and the doctrines they proclaimed as evidence that the world possesses a unitary meaning, any constitutive disjunction between the Church of England and the church of earlier ages would suggest either that Newman’s belief in the Church of England is misguided or that his system as a whole is mistaken. In either case, Newman is a false prophet. Given the internal logic of his system, it is requisite upon Newman—even, as he asserts, “a matter of life and death”—to show why the common interpretation of the Thirty-Nine Articles as a Protestant document is erroneous and how “the doctrine of the Old Church . . . live[s] and speak[s] in . . . the 39 Articles”  

Newman’s method of interpretation in Tract 90 is consonant with and required by his other work. The Thirty-Nine Articles, he alleges, are misread by being read literalistically and in isolation. If they are read as an individual document from which we attempt to discern the thoughts of particular authors, the Articles seem Protestant (which is to say, opposed to the late classical and medieval Church). However, if they are read as the composite production of a branch of the true Church, and consequently read in light of other authoritative documents from both the Anglican and early church, then they may be read as Catholic (which is to say, consonant with the late Classical and medieval Church). As Newman summarized his principles, “It is a duty . . . to take our reformed confessions in the most Catholic sense they will admit; we have no duties toward the framers”  

He achieves this end by interpreting the Articles in light of the less clearly Protestant and equally early Anglican Book of Homilies, and then the Book of Homilies in light of the writings of the Church Fathers quoted therein. Since his interpretation is possible and coherent, Newman argues, unless it is explicitly banned by
those who constitute the current Church of England (the bishops and lay faithful as a
mass), it must be a legitimate reading of the “ambiguous” articles, possibly the most
meaningful interpretation of them (Tract 90 6). By the end of Tract 90, the Church of
England is safely located within Newman’s system. The claim to authority is enormous:
Newman is putting himself forward as the man who alone truly understands the
documents that serve as his church’s constitution; as Landow suggests of the Victorian
sages as a group, he casts himself as restoring the forgotten truths of tradition to a lost
nation (23).

However, Tract 90 proved to be the greatest literary disaster of Newman’s life. As
Kingsley reminds the public in his pamphlet What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?,
Tract 90 “made all the rest of England believe him a dishonest man” (Kingsley What,
Then 320). In the Apologia, the failure of No. 90 is depicted as a trauma to Newman’s
authority—the attack comes on suddenly and unexpectedly, breaks through his
intellectual defenses, and cannot be reconciled with his philosophical system and self-
understanding. As Newman recollects, his enemies both Liberal and Evangelical—the
opponents, respectively, of his stress on dogma and on intertextual interpretation—
realized that with the publication of the tract “A false step had been made”; they lost “not
a moment . . . in proceeding to action,” and successfully poisoned ecclesiastical and
public opinion toward both Newman and his work (Apologia 78, cf. 51). Tract 90
triggered a “sudden storm of indignation . . . throughout the country,” an “outbreak” for
which Newman “was quite unprepared” and whose “violence” “startled” him (Apologia
78). Newman’s intertextual method of interpretation and disregard for authorial intention
may have been justified under his own system, but they struck the public and reviewers
as sophistry, sheer lying, or spiritual treason (cf. Lowe 22-23, Newman Letter to Jelf 24). As the Bishop of Madras charged, Newman had violated the “duty to take the Articles in the literal and grammatical sense of the words”; he had “wrested [the articles] from their plain meaning,” and had thereby removed, through what amounts to an act of deconstruction, meaning from language, worse, divine meaning from sacred language (qtd. in Bricknell 37).

The general rejection of his interpretation of the articles—an interpretation that Newman himself had said depended on the sufferance of the public and bishops for its validity—made Newman’s intellectual position untenable, and amounted in his own words to “the ‘hoisting of the engineer on his own petard’” (Newman Apologia 112). Even self-defense was essentially impossible, for the theory of the economy posits that truth must be expressed in terms that an audience can understand, and in the atmosphere of total hostility No. 90 had aroused, the public was unwilling to understand sympathetically anything that Newman might happen to say. Newman writes, “I saw indeed clearly that my place in the [Oxford] Movement was lost; public confidence was at an end; my occupation was gone. It was simply an impossibility that I could say anything henceforth to good effect . . . when in every part of the country and every class of society, through every organ and opportunity of opinion . . . I was denounced” (Apologia 78-79). His intellectual consistency and authority thoroughly destroyed, Newman’s public image passed into the control of his ideological opponents and his ability to teach dissolved. As he puts it, having been “beaten . . . in a fair field,” he had then “fallen into the hands of the Philistines,” and had ended by being “virtually put away” as “a teacher” by his “community” (Newman Apologia 78, 167, 171).
Following his intellectual defeat, Newman’s public image was controlled by his opponents. Newman the author and sage became, and remained, replaced in the English mind by the interpretations of Newman others had offered; in Newman’s famous images, his voice and visage were stolen by the “phantom who gibbers instead of me” and the “scarecrow which is dressed up in my clothes” (*True Mode* 361). Two (shortly three) overlapping explanations of Newman became prominent, and both cited *No. 90* as evidence: either Newman was a nihilist who did not really believe in the existence of truth or he was a Papist spy inside the Church of England (cf. DeLaura “Newman as Prophet” 233, Gywnn 39, *Tract XCI* 27-28). Many pamphlet writers in the early 1840s complained that “if the system [Newman’s] of construing everything just as we please, however contrary to its evident sense and spirit, be allowed, we may of course affix any given sense to any given number of words; we may make the Bible blasphemy or Owenism good Christianity,” while others charged that Newman was a “Papis[t] in disguise” whose works possessed “the very spirit of Popery,” and who differed from the Pope himself (if at all) only on the issue of whether “the seat of infallibility is fixed at Rome” or at “Oxford” (*Short Letter* 13-14, Edward Thompson 14, *Controversy* 30, “Remarks” 197). Neither image of Newman dies out in the twenty-three years that transpire between *Tract 90* and the *Apologia*, and by 1864, as Newman notes, they form a “tradition” in the English mind (Newman *True Mode* 359). Later events, such as Newman’s conversion to Catholicism in 1845 or his troubles with the Roman authorities in the 1850s, are often simply taken as evidence of his perverse allegiance to Catholicism—many argue that by converting, Newman is displaying his secret loyalties in the open—or of his nihilism—many argue that by quarreling with the Roman
authorities, Newman reveals that he will accept no authority outside of his own will (cf. Kelly 29, Faber 9, 15).\textsuperscript{7} Newman was well acquainted with this tradition both in its origin and later developments; a careful follower of his public image, he collected and read nearly all of the pamphlets I have cited to describe it.\textsuperscript{8}

The third damning literary version of Newman originates with his conversion. In 1845, feeling that in rejecting \textit{Tract 90} the Church of England had rejected the Conciliar Church (and thereby its claim to ecclesiastical legitimacy), Newman in \textit{An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine} rewrote the history of the Church of the Fathers as evidence for Roman Catholicism. Immediately upon finishing the work, he converted to the Catholic Church. Much of the High Church party responded to this development by concluding that while Newman may have been sincere and even valuable during his time in the English Church, his conversion, inspired by misguided reasoning or an overactive imagination, had stripped him of any legitimacy and made him a slave in thrall to the Church of Rome. This version of Newman’s life posits that while Newman’s Anglican works remain valuable, in converting to Catholicism Newman has lost the continuity of his self, the right to think for himself, and, with them, his literary authority.

Elizabeth Harris, in her Tractarian convert novel \textit{From Oxford to Rome} (1847), most graphically depicts the costs of this version of Newman to Newman’s authority. Newman, she writes, had been “our Spiritual Master, our Oracular Intellect,” the “Undoubted Intellectual Chief” of a large movement, even, like Christ, “the Shepherd” of his “sheep”; now, “The Shepherd is smitten and the sheep are scattered” for Newman no longer rules over even himself, but has instead become “one of Rome’s most remarked conquests” (Harris 159, 240). Harris is quite explicit about what it means to be
conquered by Rome: Romanism compels an “unreasoning submission” that “annihilates voluntary agency” and reduces the individual to “an automaton”; its vowed religious are “machine[s]” that have “no mind,” its priests have lost their selves and are not “the same men” as before (210, 223, 273, 274, 206-7, emphasis Harris’s). Newman read and reacted strongly to *From Oxford to Rome*, writing *Loss and Gain* explicitly in response to Harris’s work, and using his novel to address the charges that a convert to Catholicism, having lost all individual will and independent thinking, has also ultimately “lost his identity and turned out [to be] someone else” (Newman *Loss and Gain* 117 ff., 262; Dorman 174). In sum, when in *What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?*, Kingsley alleges that Newman is either a knave who has destroyed his “sense of honesty” to manipulate others or a dupe who has destroyed his “common sense” in getting himself to bow to superstitious Catholic doctrines, he sums up the three popular images of Newman I have been sketching: the nihilist devoid of honesty, the crafty Papist spy, and the deluded intellectual slave (320). When Newman complains in the opening pages of the *Apologia*, “If I was to be acquitted of the crime of teaching and preaching dishonesty . . . it was at the price of my being considered no longer responsible for my actions,” he expresses the difficult position in which these three images in combination place him (3).

These dominant images of Newman derive much of their force and staying power from their connections to two of the most prominent epistemological systems of the mid-Victorian period—scientific empiricism (inductive reasoning) and systematic logic (deductive reasoning). Especially in the Newman-Kingsley controversy, Newman’s sage claims cause the question “What is Newman?” to be derived from the larger question “What is truth?” (cf. Kingsley *What, Then* 320). For the empiricists, facts are self-
interpreting or, at most, interpret themselves with the aid of common sense; since Newman has insisted throughout his career that facts and texts do not self-interpret, it follows for the empiricists that he has evaded the self-evident truth, and must be a crafty liar or a sophistical fanatic. For the logicians, the syllogism is always a reliable guide to truth, in this case as others: to be a Catholic is to submit one’s individual judgment to the Pope and to the local bishop; Newman has become a Catholic; therefore, it follows that Newman has given up to Pope and bishop his individual right to interpret the world. As I have discussed, Newman considered both the inductive and deductive methods to be in themselves reductive, and his attempt in the *Apologia* to restore his interpretive control over his own life and works is necessarily both a hermeneutical and epistemological battle.\(^{10}\) Hence, the two intellectual and spiritual rivals with whom the *Apologia* is most concerned each represent one of these epistemologies, Charles Kingsley empiricism and Nicholas Wiseman abstract logic.\(^{11}\) While there were better scientists than Kingsley and better logicians than Wiseman, each was an influential ecclesiastic, best-selling author, and important popularizer—or, better, to use Gillian Beer’s language with regard to Kingsley, “mythologize[r]”—of the epistemology he accepted (Beer 128). Both are in significant ways analogous to and serve as appropriate rivals for Newman. Consequently, to understand how the *Apologia* attempts to free Newman from the grip of rival philosophies and their phantom Newmans, we must also examine the thought of these authors and their (textual) relations with (the textual) Newman.
II: “The True Mode of Meeting Mr. Kingsley”: Autobiography vs. Empiricism

Charles Kingsley, Anglican priest, ally of Charles Darwin and friend of T. H. Huxley, speaks for the scientific empiricism that dominates mid-nineteenth century thought, and which is increasingly equated with “truth-telling” and thereby with reality itself (cf. Beer 129, Kucich 9, Levine *Darwin* 12). In 1864, Kingsley was at the height of his popularity and influence. One of the best-selling authors of the 1850s and 1860s, he had recently been appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge by the Prince Consort and was “serv[ing] as private tutor to the Prince of Wales at Cambridge” (Buckton 360). Friends and foes described him as a true or false “prophet” (cf. Hawley 135). It might seem counter-intuitive for an influential ecclesiastic to serve as the champion of an essentially materialist philosophy, but Kingsley idiosyncratically redefines Christianity as enlightened empiricism or, as he sometimes phrased it, “healthy materialism” (qtd. in Fasick 98, cf. Downes 52). Kingsley’s Christianity is essentially Carlyle’s natural-supernaturalism simplified and recast in an empiricist paradigm. In Kingsley’s eccentric interpretation of the incarnation of Christ, the central doctrine of Christianity is that matter is divine and man God; as Kingsley reasons, man is a material animal, and ‘Hominis est=Ergo Christi est=Ergo Dei est” (Kingsley *Alton Locke* 285, Rosen 25, 28, qtd. in Rosen 27). As Lancelot Smith, the protagonist of Kingsley’s novel *Yeast*, insists, “The true idea of Protestantism” is the “dignity of matter,” and a “truly consistent and logical Protestant” is “therefore a Materialist” (266, 157). For Kingsley, amateur scientist and near-pantheist, God, insofar as we can know him, is continuous with the material universe and the material universe can faithfully be expressed as an infinite series of empirical facts; therefore, scientific facts quite literally reveal the being
of God, and the laws of science are identical with the divine nature (Houghton 402, cf. Dorman 192, Beer 127-28). Kingsley’s dictum that “He who has seen spores has seen the Father” or references to “the divineness of facts” illustrate his essentially empirical-cum-pantheistic view of the deity in a surprisingly frank manner (qtd. in Muller 24, Kingsley *Town Geology* 249, 9). The scientific fact is, in the fullest sense, ultimate reality. Since the material, for all practical purposes, is God, Kingsley can reasonably affirm that his “theological creed has grown slowly and naturally out of [his] physical one” and that his Christianity is just a restatement in different terms of the principles and laws of science (Kingsley *Alton Locke* 133, Houghton 394, qtd. in 397). Similarly, Kingsley also attempted “to identify spiritual or moral law with physical law,” and his famous social ideas, muscular Christianity and Christian socialism, are derived from this equation (Fasick 92). Since “the ‘scientific’ truth about God’s creation” reveals that two strictly differentiated human genders are necessary for our propagation and well-being, and since the theory of evolution reveals that individual physical or mental attributes alone validly determine individual worth and survival, to alter gender norms or support a hereditary class system is to commit sin (Fasick 92, Beer 127 ff.).

For an uncomplicated scientific empiricist like Kingsley, inductive reasoning is the only sure means to knowledge, releasing the individual both from the difficulties that beset deductive reasoning—such as the difficulty of establishing valid initial premises—and from the notorious unreliability of intuition. As Kingsley writes, “knowing the facts of nature” is “true wisdom” and, therefore, the “inductive habit of mind” is the “the most valuable of treasures” (*Town Geology* 18, 13). There is little difference other than terminology between Kingsley’s Christian empiricism and the empiricism of a morally
strident agnostic like T. H. Huxley (Vance 6-7, 100-1; Houghton 392-93). For Kingsley, as for many mid-Victorians enamored of science, in a world full of political and religious doubt and strife, scientific facts are “objective,” “ideologically uncontaminated” and self-interpreting (Fasick 91, Levine Darwin 11). If, he suggests, we avoid the dangerous voices of sophists and ideologues, who would distract us with their appeals to emotion and language games, and instead listen to the facts, the truth will be revealed to us. As Kingsley puts it, the “scientific method . . . needs no definition; for it is simply the exercise of common sense” (“Science” 240, cf. Town Geology 8).

The primary function and value of the scientific method for Kingsley as for most mid-Victorian advocates of the method is to “squelc[h] the subjectivity of [human] interpretation” and “‘let nature speak for itself’” (Fasick 91; Dalston 81, 102; Levine Darwin 11). For many, truth was associated with science, and valid science was that which restricted the researcher’s purview to accurate observation of data and which forbade acts of interpretation of scientific data from being presented as such; in short, individual human subjectivity only falsified analysis and obscured the truth (Daston and Galliston 81-83). This highly influential idea naturally tended to discredit philosophers, Victorian sages, and other thinkers who openly cast themselves as interpreters employing a self-invented scheme of interpretation. As Jan-Melissa Schramm notes in another context, “The idea that a fact could ‘speak for itself,’ was anti-hermeneutic in nature” (20).

As most historians of the subject suggest, the epistemological dominance of the self-interpreting fact in the mid-Victorian era would be hard to overestimate. By 1864, the prestige of the natural sciences had encouraged the rise of “scientific history,” which
demands that the historian simply uncover and objectively present the facts of history, which are to interpret themselves without interference on the part of the historian (Vierhaus 313-15). As George Levine observes, the realism then dominant in literature aspired to a “stance of third-person detachment” and claimed to present “facts, [and] avoid introspection and theorizing,” narrative commitments derived in part from the attempt to possess some measure of the “authority of science” (Darwin 14, 133). In the religious sphere, the primary point of agreement between Broad Church anti-Catholics like Kingsley, who held science to be the primary source of truth, and traditional anti-Catholics like G. S. Faber and Elizabeth Harris, who held the Bible to be the primary source of truth, was the premise that texts and facts were self-interpreting (cf. Newman Idea 204). 15 Both styles of anti-Catholicism considered Catholicism’s primary fallacy to be its postulate that the world and Bible are too complex in nature and disparate in components for their meaning to be readily apparent to an honest observer, and that therefore an inspired interpreter (the Church) is needed if the world and the Bible are to be understood as possessing a unified meaning (Rupert 455, Jost “What Newman Knew” 252). 16 Kingsley references this charge in his pamphlet against Newman, asserting that “the intent” of Newman’s “seemingly sceptic method” is “to tell us that we can know nothing certainly, and therefore must take blindly what ‘The Church’ chooses to teach us” (What, Then 333). The ideas that the Book of Nature and the Book of Revelation both speak plainly and interpret themselves are closely linked, as a literal pattern of reading is often tied to a materialist world view; for Kingsley, in fact, metaphors are essentially lies (Helmling 54, Adams 101). 17
In keeping with this trend, though Kingsley was born into an aristocratic family, graduated from Cambridge, functioned as a priest, and widely declaimed on subjects social, scientific, and theological, in his writings he employs a common man’s rhetoric and never accepts his status as a privileged interpreter. Kingsley always presents his conclusions as those of an average man who is simply facing plain facts, and often mocks philosophers, orators, and others who openly interpret facts or use them to persuade. This contrast is perhaps most starkly seen in Kingsley’s novel *Hypatia*, in which years of sitting at the feet of the learned philosopher Hypatia leave the honest skeptic Raphael essentially ignorant of the truths of the universe, and a few weeks of carefully observing the behavior of his dog bring him enlightenment (172-82, 383). Even the narratorial intrusions in Kingsley’s novels are justified primarily on the grounds that he is speaking not his own thoughts, but “the thoughts of many hearts,” what many people—or, at least, males of average intelligence—could “interpret for themselves” if they were not “too busy” to do so (Kingsley “To George Brimley” 41).¹⁸

While Kingsley’s novels are far from realistic, since Gillian Beer has established Kingsley as a mythologizer of Darwinism and George Levine has established Darwinism (in the broad sense) as the basis of the operant assumptions of realism, Kingsley can accurately be described as the author of a realist mythos. Though Kingsley’s novels never describe the material universe in any detail, they are often the stories of a man (Raphael in *Hypatia*, Lancelot Smith in *Yeast*, Alton Locke in *Alton Locke*) who metamorphoses into a higher being by discovering the value of concrete facts and accepting the law of nature as revealed therein. Kingsley’s comments on his novels suggest that their greatest purpose, like that of realism as a whole, is to show that
individual characters are created by a complex interaction with their environment, and not simply by “self-evolution” from within (Kingsley “To George Brimley” 40). Kingsley’s protagonists are themselves self-interpreting facts that continually explain their meaning to any passer-by willing to listen, and in Kingsley’s novels any characters who hold thoughts or ideas in silent reserve tend to be villainous. In many ways Hypatia—an Alexandrian neo-Platonic philosopher of great rhetorical power who idealizes celibacy, yearns to revive a discredited ancient religion, participates in secret plots, and scorns material facts—resembles Newman as Kingsley saw him, and Kingsley’s attack on Newman is essentially a vindication of the scientific inductive method over one of its most prominent contemporary critics (Kingsley Hypatia 56-57, 120-21, 288, 360, cf. Culler 110).19

In keeping with his premises, Kingsley in What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean? does not so much claim to interpret Newman’s words and deeds as to simply to give a “plain account” of their “plain and straightforward signification” to which “the average of educated Englishmen” would “likely” assent (310, 316). For Kingsley, Newman is a man who, either for sophistic or romanticist reasons (the motive, as it is not a material fact, does not really matter)20, prefers his own interpretations to the plain meaning of facts and texts, and his chief evil is that he persuades others to his own epistemological errors. The charge is repeated again and again, and is perhaps the fundamental intellectual accusation in the pamphlet. Newman is “the most perfect orator of this generation,” a master of the “ingenious special pleading with which, in spite of plain fact and universal public opinion, black is made to appear, if not white, yet still grey enough to do instead” (Kingsley What, Then 316, 329). Newman is guilty of “denying or explaining away . . .
“notorious to every honest student of history” (Kingsley What, Then 317). In Tract 90, Kingsley asserts, Newman often makes “the Articles say the very thing which (I believe) the Articles were meant not to say” (What, Then 319). The Lives of the English Saints series that Newman promoted and in part edited is the worst “public outrage on historic truth, and on plain common sense, [that] has been perpetrated in this generation” (Kingsley What, Then 320). The consequence of Newman’s separation of the idea of truth from the idea of fact is that “Historic truth is . . sapped; and physical truth [i.e., science] fares no better” (Kingsley What, Then 333). The connected themes of Kingsley’s pamphlet are most succinctly expressed in an outburst following a summary of Newman’s defense of ecclesiastical miracles: “If this be ‘historic truth,’ what is historic falsehood? If this be honesty, what is dishonesty? If this be wisdom, what is folly?” (What, Then 324).

As Kingsley’s outburst suggests, since Newman sees no inherent value or meaning in facts, he has no commitment to faithfully represent reality, and therefore no reason (and, perhaps, no ability) to refrain from lying (What, Then 339). Like most Roman clergy, Newman fails to realize that “facts are the property not of man, to be ‘economized’ [cast in the rhetorically oriented terms of Newman’s Economy] as man thinks fit, but of God” and that such economizing is a “sin . . . against God” (Kingsley What, Then 339). Having rejected the premise of self-interpreting facts and texts, Newman becomes a chilling symbol of the consequence of abandoning empiricism; he is “the slave and puppet of his own logic, really of his own fancy, ready to believe anything, however preposterous, into which he could, for the moment argue himself” (Kingsley What, Then 320). He has “gambled away” his “human reason” and destroyed his
“common sense”—which, we should remember, Kingsley equates with the scientific method (What, Then 330, 320). Worse, Newman’s minimizing of facts has “injured” the “straightforwardness and truthfulness” of his followers, thereby bringing “misery and shame into many an English home” (Kingsley What, Then 317, 320). The statement that triggered Newman’s famous charge of “poisoning the wells”—Kingsley’s suggestion that both he and the British public should approach all of Newman’s future writings with “doubt and fear,” for they will undoubtedly be untruthful—is just a more forceful expression of Kingsley’s central charge, that there is a significant “difference between his [Newman’s] notions of truth and ours” (What, Then 337, 339, 340).

In keeping with his epistemology, Kingsley treats Newman himself as a fact that needs, or should need, no interpretation. For Kingsley, appearances are facts and do not deceive; explanations, on the other hand, are linguistic constructions and are usually deceptive. “‘Do not be solicitous,’ he wrote his future wife, ‘to find deep meanings in men’s words. Most men do, and all men ought to mean only what is evident at first sight’” (qtd. in Houghton 397-98). The fact that Newman on first sight seems a quack or charlatan means that indeed he is so. Correspondingly, Kingsley charges,

if I, like hundreds more, have mistaken his [Newman’s] meaning and intent, he must blame not me, but himself. If he will indulge in subtle paradoxes, in rhetorical exaggerations; if, whenever he touches on the question of truth and honesty, he will take a perverse pleasure in saying something shocking to plain English notions, he must take the consequences of his own eccentricities. (What, Then 327)

“No one would have suspected him [Newman] to be an honest man, if he had not perversely chosen to assume a style which (as he himself confesses) the world always associates with dishonesty” (Kingsley What, Then 318). Kingsley repeatedly indicates
that the world is not wrong in this judgment and that things are indeed what they seem; the baneful effect of Newman’s influence is a “fact . . . notorious to all England” (What, Then 318). Kingsley’s title and refrain of “What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?” is not so much a question as an accusation; that a person’s conduct requires an explanation is itself evidence that the conduct is false or ill-intended.

Newman faces an immense difficulty in replying to Kingsley. The circular nature of Kingsley’s logic—it is a fact that those who do not believe in facts are frauds and liars—only makes it the more irrefutable. Since facts are self-interpreting in the dominant paradigm to which Kingsley has appealed, any attempt to re-explain the facts in light of Newman’s own philosophy must appear to be sophistry; any appeal to motive is an appeal to subjectivity and therefore invalid. As Newman complains with regard to Kingsley’s appeal to the public prejudice against him and methods in general, “if Mr. Kingsley” has his way with Newman’s “readers,” “the more I succeed [in refuting his charges], the less will be my success . . . . If I am convincing, he will suggest that I am an able logician; . . . if I clear up difficulties, I am too plausible and perfect to be true” (Mr. Kingsley’s 351). To put the problem in narrative terms, since the scientific fact is the basis of literary realism’s “antimetaphorical and . . . antitheoretical” methods, any attempt of Newman’s to autobiographically justify himself in light of his theories about the metaphorical nature of meaning must seem unrealistic (Levine Darwin 210, 4, 38).

Newman is in the rather difficult position of having to defend interpretation itself (cf. Helmling 100).

In his pamphlet replies to What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean? and in the opening chapter of the Apologia (a work originally published as a continuation of the
same pamphlet series), Newman makes a crucial series of rhetorical choices that shift the metaphysical terms on which he is being judged, calling the hermeneutics of scientific fact and realist narrative into question, and opening a narrative space more amenable to his own philosophy. While some of these rhetorical choices have been noticed by previous critics, they have never been discussed in terms of the basic metaphysical fissure between Kingsley and Newman, which is perhaps the central difficulty in Newman’s defense of his authority. The most important move Newman makes is the most obvious, though its full significance has escaped critical notice. As the Apologia’s title itself suggests, Newman is quick to shift the terms of his conflict with Kingsley out of the realm of scientific fact into the terms of the legal trial. In Newman’s three pamphlets preceding the Apologia, he describes their conflict as a “trial,” accuses Kingsley of bearing “false witness,” and describes his “countrymen” as his “judges” and prophesies his “acquittal” at their hands from Kingsley’s “Act of Accusation” (Mr. Kingsley and Dr. Newman 309, Mr. Kingsley’s 343, True Mode 352, 353).

The Victorian era was, by its own proclamation, an age of transition, in which no epistemological or metaphysical consensus existed. Correspondingly, there was also no epistemological consensus among the institutions that were socially authorized to determine truth or reality. In appealing from science to the law, Newman is playing one privileged interpretive schemata against another, hoping thereby to render his philosophy again economically expressible to a public whose epistemologies are far removed from his own. In my discussion of the epistemological significance of Victorian law, I will largely follow Jan-Melissa Schramm’s masterful study of the subject. Since, due to a strict focus on the novel, Schramm analyzes Newman’s Callista but omits his Apologia,
her work provides necessary background for, without anticipating, my analysis. Schramm discusses the epistemology of the law primarily in terms of the divide between testimony and circumstantial evidence. While circumstantial evidence was a legal form of the appeal to the self-interpreting fact (or, at least, the fact as self-interpreting by means of an expert), testimony in the Victorian era was, by comparison, a legal form of proof that was weighted more highly and that appealed to a different epistemological register. In the late eighteenth-century height of the Enlightenment, testimony, like circumstantial evidence, had been seen in British law as possessing a transparent and largely self-interpreting meaning (Schramm 20). In serious criminal trials requiring for a verdict proof of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, a defense counsel had been forbidden, on the grounds that the defendant’s testimony would self-interpret sufficiently for judge or jury to know if reasonable doubt existed. However, by the mid-nineteenth century British law—in part because of the influence of fiction and newspaper reporting—had come to be sufficiently concerned with the motives of accused criminals as to deny that their external words and actions served as self-interpreting texts and facts (Schramm 20). The right to a defense counsel, which was established at this time, derives from the idea that no statement is sufficiently self-interpreting to be fairly judged on its own merits by a judge or jury, without the intervention of counsel as an interpreter (Schramm 101). As Newman observes with reference to his own case, people will “read a defense in a good sense or bad” depending on their “habitual prejudice” or “antecedent impressions”; for this reason, “The very same sentiments” can serve as “tokens of truth or of dissimulation and pretense” (Mr. Kingsley’s Method 350). When testimony seems self-
interpreting, the subjectivity of judge and jury may simply be so large as to pass unnoticed.

The rhetoric of the trial allows a far greater amount of open interpretation and hermeneutic play than does Kingsley’s preferred rhetoric of Victorian science and the realist novel. Consequently, the rhetoric of the trial is far more amenable to adaptation for Newman’s philosophical purposes; in fact, as Schramm notes, one of Newman’s central examples of the illative sense is that of the “great judge” who, without systematic method but with an instinct that comes with experience, can accurately see through a “web of facts” and decipher the truth (179, cf. 7). Further, the rhetoric of the trial also serves as a means by which Newman can deconstruct Kingsley’s appeal to the ethos of realism. As Schramm rightly notes, the law court represents a model of authority for the nineteenth-century realist novel that rivals and competes with that of science (23, 192). The plots of many novels fight the “epistemology of self-evident” facts by presenting situations where circumstantial evidence implicates a character whom, if we let the “accused speak” and listen to the narrator’s ingenious “interpretations” of the facts, we will know to be innocent (Schramm 191-92). Kingsley openly fears the possibilities of allowing Newman to narrate in this register, and attempts to anticipate and forestall this scenario by explaining to his readers that “great literary and even barristerial ability” such as Newman possesses do not constitute “wisdom” but mere “cleverness,” and are not to be trusted (What, Then 335, 339-40). Kingsley’s fear is Newman’s hope. As Newman realizes, when recast in terms of a legal system that emphasizes motive in determining guilt, even Kingsley’s central charge against him—that either due to knavery or foolishness he has parted ways with the truth—becomes a mere evasion, as Kingsley has
self-professedly refused to determine his “motives” (Newman *Mr. Kingsley’s* 342, *Kingsley What, Then* 326). It seems entirely reasonable for the audience to grant Newman a legal register of argument—he has, after all, been publicly charged with a public offense—but once this is granted, the greatest obstacle to Newman’s success, the fissure between his epistemology and that of his primary audience, is in large part overcome.

The switch to a legal register that privileges testimony as a form of proof authorizes the two narrative and rhetorical strategies on which the *Apologia* most relies—the minimization of apparent material facts in favor of motive, and the eschewing of a structure based primarily around continuous retrospective narration in favor of a structure based primarily around acts of textual interpretation. The switch from Newman-as-object-of-scientific-analysis to Newman-as-object-of-legal-judgment shifts the emphasis of Kingsley’s accusatory question from “What does Dr. Newman mean?,” with its focus on Newman’s external life and teaching, to “What does Dr. Newman mean?,” with its focus on Newman’s internal “living intelligence” and motive force (*True Mode* 360). In this context, Kingsley’s empiricism is no longer a self-vindicating epistemology but, rather, an interpretive obstacle that prevents him from properly understanding Newman’s less materialistic mind and motives. As Newman explains, his notion of the economy—the very concept for which Kingsley has attacked him—teaches that “minds in different states and circumstances cannot understand each other,” that, for example, “*matter-of-fact*, prosaic minds . . . cannot take in the fancies of *poets*” and “*shallow*, inaccurate minds . . . cannot take in the ideas of *philosophical* inquiries” (*Mr. Kingsley’s* 341, emphasis mine). By the same token, those who, like Kingsley, find the circumstantial
evidence of Newman’s words and deeds to be decisive evidence against his honesty and
good faith are taking merely “an external and common-sense view” of Newman and are
failing to understand his mind and motives (True Mode 359). More pointedly, Newman
alleges that Kingsley has incorrectly “read” Newman’s life and work because he is “so
constituted as to have no notion of what goes on in minds very different from his own,
and moreover to be stone-blind to his own ignorance” (Newman Mr. Kingsley’s 341). In
the legal register, as Newman plays it, a stress on external, material facts evidences an
ignorance of internal, mental motives, and is therefore at best inconclusive and at worst
simply wrong. Newman’s Apologia has often been noted to be the most reflective and
interior of mid-Victorian autobiographies, and this characteristic is rhetorically
necessitated and authorized by his defensive appeal to law and motive.

With this epistemological shift away from empiricism, Newman ceases to possess
a transparent, factual meaning before the Apologia even starts. Newman’s final
pamphlet, The True Mode of Meeting Mr. Kingsley, uses the epistemology of the
courtroom to authorize both the restoration of Newman’s interpretive authority and the
Apologia’s unconventional structure. As we have seen, by this pamphlet’s final pages,
the self-interpreting fact has been brushed aside, and Newman has become a complicated
phenomenon whose true meaning can be understood only by the intervention of an
interpreter. More precisely, like anyone on trial for a capital crime, he requires and has
the right to a defense attorney to interpret his meaning to a jury. When Newman
observes in passing, “I have to make my [own] defense,” he both evokes the sympathy of
his readers and asserts that the ball is now sufficiently in his own epistemological court
for him to begin reasserting himself as an interpreter (True Mode 359). From this point,
we move very quickly into a form that suits and is prejudged to favor Newman’s philosophical content. If Newman is to conduct his defense, he must bring forth evidence and summon witnesses. As evidence, Newman will cite “external” sources like his “books” and the writings of others, the first to establish his own thoughts, and the second to establish the initial (Protestant) inspirations for some of his more famous ideas (True Mode 361, 362). As testimony, Newman will heavily rely on “an abundance of letters” to and from friends, both to witness to his inner life from the contested period and to vouch for the “certain[ty]” of his narrative (True Mode 362).

Newman, then, will “give the true key to [his] whole life” by relating the “history of [his] mind,” and this history will be told by means of extracts from his works and letters that will be explicated and connected together by his own commentary and narrative (True Mode 361, 362). We are now in a narrative situation that is both socially authorized by the legal model and perfectly apposite to Newman’s philosophy. In the text he has envisioned, Newman is to incarnate, in some measure, his ideal of the “inspired editor”; he is to perfectly select and combine, alter and adjust flawed texts into a masterful synthesis, and this synthesis is to restore both, to Newman, interpretive control (the “true key”) over his own life and, to his works, their lost inspiration. Further, this projected text is, like many of the biblical books whose inspiration the inspired editor theory defends, to be by genre a religious history, the narrative genre accorded the greatest authority in Newman’s philosophical system. The primary work of the book is to be textual interpretation, and, in accord with the legal stress on testimony, letters will be the primary texts interpreted. Newman had long accorded letters a privileged epistemological status, for, as he had explained, while a person’s “actions . . . seldom
carry the motives along with them,” in letters a person “interprets his own action” and provides his own motives (Newman “St. Chrysostom” 219-22, 227). As Hill and Ker note, Newman considered letters to be “an empirical ‘fact’ in a world of fleeting appearances” (129). Since letters are testimonial, motive-revealing “facts” that are directed towards a specific audience and that must be carefully interpreted if they are to be properly understood by a less immediate audience, letters are a type of “fact” singularly corresponding both to legal epistemology and to Newman’s theory of the economy, in which no fact exists independent of an audience. When the *Apologia* begins, Newman has in large part already won his philosophical and interpretive battle with Kingsley. The disaster of the interpretive pastiche that was *Tract 90* will be undone by the interpretive pastiche that is the *Apologia*.

In the opening chapter of the *Apologia*, Newman secures his victory over Kingsley by turning the two most fundamental premises of the realist novel—a materialist model of the universe and a gradualist model of development—against each other. As George Levine notes, “Victorian gradualism,” derived from Lyell’s geology and Darwin’s biology, formed “the groundwork of nineteenth-century realism” (*Darwin* 5). Despite the potential for nihilism and revolution inherent in its vision of a constantly changing universe, Darwinism often served only to buttress the social order, for it taught that all development was gradual and natural, and that no sudden, dramatic changes ever occur (Levine *Darwin* 96-97, 247-49). The well known dictum that “plot is a function of character” is a systemization of the realist assumptions that characters must change and develop, that this development must be continuous and gradual, and that, in a universe without teleology, individuals are the primary agents of action (Levine *Darwin* 17, 19).
Levine sees these gradualist assumptions as superficially supported but implicitly undermined by the Darwinian concept that individuals and species are shaped by a random series of interactions with exterior, material objects and forces. This stress on the determining influence of the random and the material appears to be sufficiently authorized by empiricism’s—and realism’s—privileging of surfaces over depths and the external over the internal, but it obviously threatens the key realist premises of individual agency and continuity of character (Levine *Darwin* 249-50).

As the author of the Victorian era’s second-most-influential gradualist schema, *The Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman had no objection to constant, gradual change. In the first chapter of the *Apologia*, in fact, he informs us that he has ever held that “Growth [is the] only evidence of life” (17). The primary difference between his gradualist vision and Darwin’s is simply that Newman’s development preserves “retention of type,” and posits that, in some barebones, minimalist way, essences are preserved across vast changes (*Development* Longmans ed. 159, 300). While interaction with the exterior environment always serves to introduce an individual or institution to useful new objects and ideas, in a “true development” exterior influences are received and revised in a way continuous with, rather than destructive of, an individual or institution’s essential character. While the individual or institution constantly interacts with and is changed by the environment, external forces do not simply have autonomy over it or the final say in its identity. Newman terms the ability to interact with exterior forces without loss of essence the power of “assimilation,” and makes it, along with “retention of type,” one of the seven “notes” of a true development and of the True Church (*Development* Longmans ed. 159, 233-34, 332). Newman, in short, apprehends
the same tension in Victorian realism that Levine does, and affirms gradualism while
denyng the primacy of the material and the external. Newman plays what Levine calls
the “empiricist and gradualist assumptions” of Victorian realism off against each other,
setting the gradual development of character against the stress on the material fact
(Levine *Darwin* 5, 8, 12).

In the opening of the *Apologia*, Newman brilliantly exploits the rift between
gradualism and materialism to shape a narrative that functions according to the terms of
his philosophy while still invoking the authority (or at least the sufferance) of literary
realism. The *Apologia’s* famously bizarre initial chapter presents us with a realist
scenario per impossible: a character whose fundamental nature is Berkeleyan, a character
whose defining trait is disjunction with the material universe and who, consequently,
would suffer catastrophic change if he were shaped by it. Before the first page of
Chapter One is through, Newman has told us, “I used to wish the Arabian Tales were true
... I thought life might be a dream, or I an Angel, and all this world a deception, my
fellow-angels by a playful device concealing themselves from me, and deceiving me with
the semblance of a material world” (*Apologia* 14). Two pages later we learn that
Newman’s “inward conversion,” accomplished under the influence of the evangelicals,
still remains “more certain” to him than the existence of his “hands and feet” and that his
teenage Calvinism served to further “isolat[e] [him] from the objects which surrounded
[him], [and to] confir[m] him in [his] mistrust of the reality of material phenomena”
(Newman *Apologia* 16). From the age of fifteen, he feels called to celibacy, and this
renouncing of physical relations “also strengthened [his] feeling of separation from the
visible world” (*Newman* *Apologia* 19). Passing to Newman’s undergraduate years, we
find him beginning to develop the idea of the economy, with the premise that “material phenomena” are not ultimately and self-subsistently real, but when read rightly serve primarily as ever-unfolding “manifestations to our senses of realities greater than” themselves, an idea later reinforced by his study of the Alexandrian Fathers (Apologia 21, 34).

Newman’s gradual development as a character in the Apologia is a development into immaterialism or Berkeleyism. As Newman comes into contact with new ideas and associates and receives and processes their influences, he becomes more and more able to articulate the Berkeleyism in which he has implicitly believed all along. Though he insists he knew nothing of Berkeleyism in his youth, Newman as narrator retrospectively grants the connection between his youthful immaterialist philosophy and “what is called ‘Berkeleyism’” (Apologia 28). As the narrative progresses, this element of Newman’s thought becomes tempered only in that he comes to realize that the heart of his position—that matter does not self-evidently exist and does not possess an inherent meaning—does not require a further denial of the very existence of material phenomena themselves, a realization that is itself Berkeleyian (Apologia 21, 34).

If, as George Levine has suggested, Platonism is the most serious philosophical threat to a materialist (or, in the novel, realist) mindset, as it questions the primacy of matter, and if, as Louis Dupré has suggested, Berkeleyism is an English derivant of Platonism, as it holds that sense perceptions are not the “causes” but the “occasions” of “ideas,” Newman has deconstructed realism by embedding Platonic values in a realist-style narrative (Levine Darwin 143-44, 184; Dupré 141-43). Because Newman’s basic characteristic is his Berkeleyism, the reader who desires the Apologia to be a narrative in
which the plot is driven by the gradual development of a character must by the end of
chapter one be prepared to accept a narrative that denies empiricism. Since the
connection between the realist postulates of gradualism and materialism was more
assumed than established (as Levine notes, materialism is not inherently gradualistic and
gradualism is not inherently materialistic), few readers could have reasonable grounds for
refusing to grant the concession that Newman requests. Towards the end of Chapter One,
Newman more explicitly exposits his bifurcation of the principles of realism:

I am aware that what I have been saying [his stress on the immaterial and the
angelic] will, with many men, be doing credit to my imagination at the expense of
my judgement . . . I am not setting myself up as a pattern of good sense or of any
thing else: I am but giving a history of my opinions, with the view of showing that
I have come by them through intelligible processes of thought and honest external
means. (Apologia 36)

In short, his immaterialism must be accepted because it is a gradual development that
reflects his character. The reader who reads on must accept a universe where
interpretation and the spiritual take precedence over the apparent and the material, or else
despair of understanding Newman’s motives at all, and disqualify himself or herself as a
judge of Newman’s character. By the end of chapter one, materialism and empiricism
have been destroyed by the unlikely means of realism.

As Newman realizes, from this point on he need only keep to the course he has set
to restore his authority over his life and works. So long as he consistently abides by his
premise of gradualism, by showing that his beliefs developed slowly and naturally from
“intelligible processes of thought and honest external means,” and so long as he prevents
this gradualism from collapsing into Darwinism, by showing that while external sources
affected him, none ruled over him and determined his development, he will be vindicated
Here we have the basic plot of the *Apologia*, in which Newman, while carefully avoiding the Catholic influences who would attempt to determine his development, slowly advances from Evangelical to High Church to Tractarian to Catholic, always moving a step higher in dogma and ecclesiology in a gradual, forward progress whose outcome is desired by none who influence it (cf. *Apologia* 51-52). The public rejection of *Tract 90*, though painful, itself serves a gradualist rather than traumatic or catastrophic role, showing Newman that the final step of his development is necessary, and revealing more about the epistemological and ecclesiological shortcomings of the Anglican Church than about Newman himself (cf., for example *Apologia* 112, 128).

The degree to which the structure of the *Apologia* authorizes Newman to interpret his life in terms of his philosophical system is evidenced especially by the fact that here, for the first time in twenty-three years, Newman feels free to publicly narrate the reception of *Tract 90*. As I have already shown, *Tract 90*’s poor reception occurred in large part because the public held a literalist and implicitly materialist world view, and found both the supernatural doctrines for which Newman was arguing and the intertextual method of interpretation with which he came to their defense to be unrealistic and untruthful. Kingsley’s assault, with its openly exposed materialist and literalist foundation, gives Newman the opportunity of directly addressing—more precisely, in military terms, flanking—the metaphysical and hermeneutical opposition that had previously made his story and message unutterable.

By the time the *Apologia* reaches the subject of *Tract 90*, there is nothing to stop Newman from successfully narrating the tract’s composition, for the reader has already
been compelled, on conventional realist and legal grounds, to accept a world where nothing self-interprets and where the evident meaning of any material fact is likely not its true meaning, a world where none of the objections to Tract 90 make sense (cf. Apologia 108-9). Consequently, Newman is able in the Apologia to defend Tract 90 on grounds that, in any other context, his mid-Victorian readers would have quickly rejected. For instance, though similar points had been received in the 1841 controversy as sheer sophistry, he argues in the Apologia that his interpretations in No. 90 are valid because the Thirty-Nine articles are marked by an extreme “vagueness” that lends itself to individual interpretation, and counters the objection that “the Articles . . . are directly against Rome,” by replying, “What do you mean by Rome?” (Apologia 71). These assertions as well as others relevant to Tract 90—such as that Christ’s world-wide physical Presence in the Eucharist is rationally defensible, for “space” has “existence” only as a “subjective idea of our minds,” and that No. 90 was misunderstood because it was “used and commented on” by an “audience” for which it was not intended—fit the world that Newman has created, but would be sheer madness in a world of self-interpreting facts and texts (Apologia 68, 125 cf. 75). Newman’s willingness to fight his metaphysical battles before the autobiography begins and to embed his metaphysics in the structure of his autobiography account for a central paradox of the Apologia—its viciously controversial origin and almost entirely noncontroversial tone—and for why the Newman of the Apologia is so hard to argue with. By the end of the first chapter, it’s his world, and he feels empowered to expel Kingsley from it, commanding, “Away with you, Mr. Kingsley, and fly into space. Your name shall occur again as little as I can help, in the course of these pages” (Mr. Kingsley’s 351). As regards Newman’s central
controversy with empiricism and with Kingsley, for the body of the narrative, there is nothing to analyze.

Each of the autobiographers I am analyzing ends his narrative as soon as his authorial authority is consolidated against his primary rivals (or, as in the case of Wells, continually postpones the ending out of a fear his authority remains unconsolidated). If Newman were relating his “defense” against only Kingsley and empiricism, the Apologia could end long before it does. However, as I have suggested, one primary threat to Newman’s authority still remains after the defeat of empiricism. Newman’s authority as the Apologia frames it breaks down if Catholics influenced his conversion. I have already discussed the grave danger such a possibility poses for Newman’s brand of gradualism—that Darwin is right and external influences entirely determine individual development. More transparently, and equally damagingly, if the final shape of Newman’s beliefs and system were deliberately and successfully influenced by anyone, Newman would fall short of being a sage; he would possess the second-hand authority of a spokesman for a position developed by another rather than the independent authority of an original thinker.

The severity of the threat that Catholic influence poses for Newman is evidenced most plainly in the Apologia’s continual insistence that no such influence existed, an insistence which borders on the obsessive. Before the Apologia even begins, Newman categorizes the rumor that his ideas were “inspired by Roman theologians” as an important charge he must refute; in Chapter One he emphasizes that while visiting Italy in 1833 he and Hurrell Froude “kept clear of Catholics” as a rule; in Chapter Three he asserts that his “opinions in religion were not gained, as the world said, from Roman
sources,” explains that during the Tractarian movement he refused to “meet familiarly any leading persons of the Roman Communion,” and says that the “interference” of “Catholics” was “more likely” to “throw” him “back” towards Protestantism than to lead him to the Catholic church; and in Chapter Four he maintains that from 1843 to 1845, even while contemplating conversion himself, he “abstain[ed] altogether from intercourse with Catholics” (*True Mode* 358, *Apologia* 39, 82, 104, 105, 167). In short, as Newman wrote elsewhere of himself and his fellow Tractarians, “‘Catholics did not make us Catholics; Oxford made us Catholics’” (qtd. in Altholz 3-4). Official Catholicism—particularly as embodied in the highest-ranking Catholic official in England, Nicholas Cardinal Wiseman—poses a tremendous threat to Newman’s authority in the *Apologia*.


At the time of the *Apologia*, Wiseman, titles aside, was sufficiently popular and venerated to be a real rival to Newman, and he repeatedly and loudly asserted his intellectual and ecclesiastical authority over Newman’s work. Wiseman was a widely beloved author and lecturer who had been dubbed by the *Times* “one of the men of the day; [for] he has attained a high position; [and] he is a man of varied and wide powers—a literary man, a linguist, a man of the world, an ecclesiastical leader, an orator” (qtd. in Murphy i). Most famously, Wiseman’s 1855 novel *Fabiola*—an immediate success that had “several editions” in its first year, was quickly translated into ten European languages, and served as the model for “un genre nouveau, le roman historique religieux”—had a popular success among both Catholics and Protestants beyond that of
any of Newman’s works (Durand “Les Heroes” 18, “Les Martyrs” 83-84; Litvack 166). Since as Michel Durand points out, *Fabiola* had an immense impact on how nineteenth-century England and France viewed the early Church, and since this impact was due in part to Wiseman’s detailed historical and archeological notes to the text, Wiseman also has a claim to be a more influential interpreter of the ante-Nicene Church than Newman himself (Durand “Les Heroes” 22-25, “Les Martyrs” 82, cf. Wiseman *Fabiola* 1-3, 4, etc.).

Like Kingsley, Wiseman is a popular exponent of an epistemological method that his literary style does not clearly embody. Wiseman is committed to deductive reasoning as surely as Kingsley is committed to inductive reasoning, but for Wiseman this commitment is simply an element—and by no means the central or determining element—of a larger personal and professional mission to embody all things Catholic for the British public. An interesting and versatile, if not terribly original writer, Wiseman popularized nearly every conceivable element of Catholic thought and practice, from Catholic devotions to Catholic architecture to Catholic antiquities, most successfully when he combined the three in his bestseller *Fabiola*. As part of his adherence to mainstream Catholicism as a whole, Wiseman endorsed the operating assumptions of mainstream Catholic theology. As I have mentioned, the methodology of the conventional Catholic theology of the period was based around the premise that theology is a deductive science. The logic behind this position is as follows: If religious truth really is truth rather than personal opinion or local custom, it must be “objective” and “universal” in nature; ever since the ancient Greeks, deductive reasoning, with its reliance on non-contradiction and intellectual consistency, has in the West been commonly
considered to be the most certain way to arrive at objective, universal truths; and, since
God has revealed a basic set of truths in the Bible and Church Tradition, the primary
objection to deductive reasoning—the difficulty of establishing valid initial premises—
has been obviated for the believer (Wiseman “On Religious Unity” 312-13).28 By careful
deductive reasoning, the limited truths of revelation can be extended to cover all of
creation. As Wiseman writes, “faith was given to the world to supersede the uncertain
guidance of human speculation, and to substitute unvarying principles for vague
conjectures” (“On the Character” 287).

As in most systems that favor deduction over induction (such as Platonism or
Cartesian thought), in Wiseman’s thought the “facts” of inductive reasoning, being mere
summaries of material phenomena, are considered too variable and transient to have
much bearing on questions of objective truth. In his writings on science, Wiseman’s
genial reconciliations of the latest (1837) science, up to and including Lyell, with
“Revealed Religion” depend largely on science’s instability and relative unimportance
(“On the Natural Sciences” 333 ff.). Wiseman repeatedly observes that since the
conclusions of scientists are by their very nature “constantly changing” the truth or falsity
of any particular scientific account of reality is of no great importance; all science is
acceptable so long as the scientists are “content to collect phenomena” and do not
extrapolate their speculations into the realm of theology (“On the Natural Sciences 355-
56, 346, 287-89). Although Wiseman was a popular novelist, it is hard, given the roots of
Victorian realism in empiricism, to see how a partisan of the deductive method could
write an effective novel. Wiseman’s Fabiola has, in fact, more allegorical than novelistic
elements—the characters embody types (the self-sacrificing Christian, the prodigal son,
the depraved pagan, etc.), do not as a group change or develop, and are judged strictly according to Catholic morality—and earns its identity as a novel primarily through the conversion of its heroine (which is a substantial, gradual change), and through its famously graphic scenes of torture and execution (which are full of material detail).

Wiseman taught that Protestantism is derived from the methodological error of preferring induction to deduction, the particular to the universal in determining religious truth. In this analysis of the Catholic/Protestant divide, Wiseman seems to reflect a widespread intellectual consensus; while they differ as to its meaning and signification, both Kingsley and Newman also cast deduction versus induction as among the most important differences between the two theologies. Wiseman holds that an inductive approach to understanding Scripture and the world splits each text into a series of disparate facts that could be combined to reach correct conclusions about the nature of the whole only by God himself. As he explains in his sermon “On Religious Unity,” divisive error in religion comes from an “imperfection of [theological] method,” the mistake of “seeking it [religious truth] by parts, instead of considering it as an indivisible and perfect whole,” by “seeking individual truths, rather than the principle of truth” (310, 311). A logical, systematic and “accurate comparison of first postulates on different systems” is, Wiseman argues, a more reliable method of reaching religious truth, as it is more capable of reaching a definite conclusion (“On Religious Unity” 311).

Since correct belief in universals should with a logical inevitability proceed to correct belief in particulars, the theologians employing the deductive method tended to think that any diversity of opinion among Catholics was a misfortune and that “uniformity of sentiment” was a sign of truth (Wiseman “On Religious Unity” 309-10).
As Josef Altholz notes, “the very idea of difference among Catholics . . . was abhorrent” to Wiseman (39). Any change, even development, in the Catholic Church’s teaching was also usually denied (cf. Wiseman *Fabiola* 172, 286). In ecclesiastical politics, Catholic theologians adhering to the deductive method tended to support an Ultramontane allegiance to papal authority, as both a means of access to universal truth (since papal infallibility, if not yet officially defined, was considered a truth of both scripture and tradition, and thus an a priori of theological reasoning) and a means of securing uniformity amongst Catholics (cf. Wiseman *Fabiola* 111-12, 134-36). Jeffrey von Arx summarizes the Ultramontane logic on this point: “Because there is only one God there is only one church and only one truth within that Church, which is enunciated by the Church’s single head” (von Arx 9, cf. Wiseman “Conclusion of a Course” 403). While his Ultramontanism was muted somewhat in expression by his diplomatic character and flowery prose style, by the mid-1850s, Wiseman had become a leading English Ultramontane (Kelly 27). For the last ten years of his career (1855-65), he used his ecclesiastical office to raise other English Ultramontanes (most importantly, Henry Edward Manning and William George Ward) to positions of influence (Manning as his assistant and designated successor and Ward as professor of theology and editor of the *Dublin Review*) (Kelly 27-28, Altholz 89).

The Ultramontane and deductive theology germane to the Catholic Church at this point is necessarily hostile to the idiosyncratic and para-rational systems of sages like Newman. If truth is derived from explicit premises (the Bible, Tradition, and the statements of the Magisterium), through a uniform and standardized method of analysis (deduction), then there is no need (or possibility) for the kind of individual speculation
and philosophizing that is the work of the sage. W. G. Ward and other Ultramontanes
held that even allowing Catholic intellectuals to speculate on matters on which the Pope
had spoken but had not yet infallibly decreed was tantamount to depriving the Pope of his
position as universal teacher and splitting the Catholic church into two churches—the
commoners, who had to accept normative church teaching, and the intellectuals, who
were allowed to dissent (W. G. Ward 68, cf. Kelly 28). Thus, for the Ultramontanes,
individual speculation assails the two most important notes of Catholicism: the teaching
authority of the papacy and the universal unity of the faithful.32 Wiseman’s Fabiola—
which Newman carefully read (cf. Newman “To Cardinal Wiseman” 368)—teaches a
similar lesson to Ward’s essay, albeit with a less aggressive tone and in less propositional
language. The philosophical pagan Fabiola assumes that the intelligent Christian
Sebastian must belong to a “refined, sceptical, and reflective” branch of Christianity that
despises the “superstitions
. . . of the commoner Christians” (Wiseman Fabiola 225). In reality, as Fabiola learns,
Sebastian’s faith is the same as that of all other Catholics, and his attitude towards the
Pope is that “to hear [i]s to obey” (Wiseman Fabiola 258, 51).

Newman’s insistence on his right to theorize—essentially his insistence that he
has the right to remain a sage—and skepticism with regard to deduction result in a state
of tension between himself and the Ultramontanes. Without reference to Newman,
Wiseman states the Ultramontane position: those who hold a perfect “uniformity of
sentiment” in theological matters to be undesirable or unnecessary, and thus individual
speculation to be permissible, must be deemed to have “but a very mean regard for truth,
and [to have] rated their science [theology] exceedingly low” (“On Religious Unity” 309-
In fact, Wiseman so values uniformity of religious belief that he even considers it self-discrediting for theologians to change their minds, and thereby disagree with themselves. He suggests that if the “leading men” of a “science” such as theology change their minds about their beliefs, this development calls into question the objective validity of the beliefs of both the individuals and their discipline, and may cause each to “fall into disrepute” (Wiseman “On Religious Unity” 310). In 1841, before he had come to adhere to Ultramontanism as a movement, Wiseman had already applied this principle to the ever-self-revising Newman, asking in an open letter to Newman that was read by its addressee, “Why not suspect your judgments, if you find that they vary?” (Wiseman Letter Respectfully 30, Earnest and Tracy 104).

Henry Edward Manning, Wiseman’s friend and successor as Archbishop of Westminster, more explicitly addresses both the methodological and philosophical differences involved in Ultramontanist quarrel with Newman. In a “pastoral letter” to the Catholics of England, Manning lambastes the “pretensions” of those who, like Newman, base their theological method on historical research rather than on straight deduction (Manning 27, 41, 126-27). More philosophically, since the Ultramontanes (like the empiricists) consider truth to be knowable through a simple and systematic method, and language to be capable of fully expressing truth, they also (like the empiricists) must consider Newman’s philosophy of the economy, in which truth is always partial and always requires an audience, to amount to a nihilistic denial of truth. In the same pastoral letter, Manning—to whom, as Gilley notes, “truth was always propositional” and “logic[ally] . . . explicit”—accuses those who believe in the non-propositional philosophies of the “econom[y]” and “disciplina arcani” of being in a state of “infidelity.
to truth” (Gilley 248; Manning 38-39, 146-47).\textsuperscript{35} The similarities to Kingsley’s charges are clear, and telling.

As Newman would later famously allege in his \textit{Letter to Pusey} and \textit{Letter to the Duke of Norfolk} and as he was already observing in his letters, the “wild words and overbearing deeds” of the Ultramontanes seemed to verify the Protestant accusation that converts to Catholicism underwent a “loss of mental and moral freedom” (\textit{Letter to Pusey} 22-24, \textit{Letter to Duke} 176-77, 179, 342).\textsuperscript{36} \textit{From Oxford to Rome} was right after all. The Ultramontane insistence on uniformity and submission places Newman in an untenable position as a sage, whether it is applied to his case generously (as often in Wiseman’s public writings) or ungenerously (as often in Manning’s public writings). If, as he still insists, Newman is truly loyal to Pope and bishop, then, by the Ultramontane logic, he must have surrendered his right to think independently and individualistically; if, as he also insists, he is still free to think independently and individualistically, then he must be a sophist who refuses to be bound by his own religious profession (cf. Kelly 29, W. G. Ward 91). The first possibility only verifies, although it differs in connotation from, Elizabeth Harris’s (and others’) view of Newman-as-intellectual-slave, while the second possibility strengthens, although it differs somewhat from, Kingsley’s view of Newman-as-sophist. Wiseman tends to portray Newman as an orator rather than as a thinker, and praises his “eloquent pleadings for the faith,” while Manning, as I have shown above, suggests that Newman has no regard for truth (Wiseman “Froude’s Remains” 94). Thus, ultimately, this Catholic binary simply reifies the dominant Protestant images of Newman, Newman the slave of Rome and Newman the sophist.\textsuperscript{37} With the notable exception of the essay “On Consulting the Faithful on Matters of Doctrine” (which
caused him to be delated to Rome on suspicion of heresy), Newman remained publicly silent on the Ultramontane controversy from 1855 to 1864, which allowed his conduct and writings to be interpreted in varying ways, as submission or defiance, depending on the interpreter and year. Since in my discussion of Kingsley I have already discussed the idea of Newman-as-sophist at some length, it is with Newman-as-slave that I am particularly concerned. In Ultramontanism’s use of deductive theology, the image of Newman-as-intellectual-slave finds a metaphysical buttress equal to the support Newman-as-sophist receives from scientific empiricism.

At the heart of the Ultramontane philosophy is the submission of the individual to the collective—personal impressions to an all-encompassing logic, particular individuals to the universal hierarchy of the Church. The Catholic convert voluntarily surrenders his generally misguided private judgment to the guidance of a divinely inspired hierarchy, a surrender rendered ultimately to the Pope as head of this hierarchy and proximately to the bishop—who receives the convert’s act of submission and bestows on him the sacrament of confirmation—as its local representative. To apply this logic to Newman’s case, for both the Ultramontanes and for Anglicans (or would-be Anglicans)38 like Elizabeth Harris and Pusey, there is a particular moment when Newman loses his authority to interpret the world: when he submits to this hierarchy. And, as the Apologia makes clear, the particular bishop to whom Newman submitted at Oxford in 1845 was Nicholas Wiseman (52, 182). If Ultramontanism places Newman in apparent thrall not merely to an institution in general but to another English writer in particular, that author is logically Wiseman, later also Newman’s titular superior as head of the Catholic Church in England. In the autobiographical prefaces and notes to his collected essays (1853),
Wiseman presents us with a portrait of just such a Newman as Ultramontanist logic might deduce, a Newman who converts to Catholicism because he was intellectually defeated and captured by Nicholas Wiseman, and who has been ruled by Wiseman thereafter.

Though they have been ignored by critics, Wiseman’s accounts of the thought and life of Newman are in many ways as damaging to his authority as Kingsley’s. From the 1830s on, Wiseman interpreted, attempted to influence and narrated the life and thought of John Henry Newman, a process culminating in 1853 with two autobiographical prefaces. As the Apologia mentions, Wiseman first met Newman and Hurrell Froude in Rome in 1833. Following this meeting, which he repeatedly publicized, Wiseman began a series of publications with the intent of persuading those of like mind to Newman and Froude to convert to Catholicism (Wiseman Letter Respectfully 1, Gwynn 39). These works, full of praise for Newman’s writings and insistence that their logical end is Roman Catholicism, caused no end of trouble for the Anglican Newman’s public image, and inadvertently helped support the idea that Newman was a secret Catholic (cf. Gwynn 39). During the Tract 90 controversy, pamphleteers like Edward Thompson alleged that the “encouragement and approbation” “Dr. Wiseman’s publications” give to Newman’s writings prove that Newman is “actually doing the work of the Roman Catholic priests” (20). By May 1842, Newman was complaining to Keble that “Poor Dr. Wiseman is dying to get us, and this makes him write in an anxious, forced, rhetorical way, being not a little pompous in manner, though I believe it is principally manner” (qtd. in Reynolds 79).

Wiseman’s strongest claim to have influenced Newman rests on his 1839 essay “The Catholic and Anglican Churches.” In this essay, for rhetorical purposes Wiseman
discards the deductive method common among Catholic theologians at the time, and
takes on Newman at his own game, historical theology. He pledges to accept “the
standard by which the [Tractarian] divines . . . desire to be measured” and “strictly to
adhere to the method” of “examining it [the Anglican Church] by the light of
antiquity, and judging it entirely by the rules laid down and determined by the fathers of
the primitive Church” (Wiseman “Catholic and Anglican” 208). Wiseman’s essay is a
series of historical analogies between the fourth century schismatic group the Donatists
and the Anglican church—for instance, both originate due to “covetousness,” “ambition”
for titles, and a woman’s desires, both initially involve no material heresy, and both claim
the Catholic name (“Catholic and Anglican” 210). More interestingly, among the essay’s
historical parallels is an implication that Newman is a modern version of the Donatist
Ticonius and that Wiseman himself is Augustine redux. Ticonius, we are informed, held
to a branch theory of the Church, claimed that the Donatists were part of the Catholic
Church, and was accused by his fellow Donatists of Catholicism. Seeing Ticonius’s
“learning and good intentions,” the wise and good-hearted Augustine both defended
Ticonius against the other Donatists and tried to convert him to the true Church
(Wiseman “Catholic and Anglican” 256-57).

The writings of St. Augustine—in particular, his “golden sentence” on how, in
reference to the Donatist controversy, one can distinguish the true Catholic Church from
false claimants to the title—also serve as the logical linchpin of the essay (Wiseman
“Catholic and Anglican” 224). Augustine writes, “Quapropter SECURUS judicat
orbis terrarum, bonos non esse qui se dividunt ab orbe terrarum, in quacumque parte orbis
terrarum,” which Wiseman translates as, “Wherefore, the whole world judges WITH
SECURITY, that they are not good, who separate themselves from the entire world, in whatever part of the entire world” (“Catholic and Anglican” 224, emphasis Wiseman’s).

Wiseman is explicit about the meaning of this “general rule” for “all future possible divisions”—“only that can be the true Church, which is dispersed over the whole world”; the “very circumstance” of a church being national or regional in character evidences schism—and asserts that it “should be an axiom in theology” (“Catholic and Anglican” 217, 224-25). Wiseman’s essay is an enormous problem for Newman’s authority, immediately (in 1839) because it turns the authority of antiquity against the Anglican Church, ultimately (in 1845 and after) because it influences Newman’s conversion to Catholicism—Newman in the end accepts Wiseman’s appraisal of his self and system. Newman’s *Development of Doctrine* (1845), without referencing Wiseman directly, repeats both Wiseman’s main conclusions and his appeal to Augustine for their justification (Newman *Development* Image ed. 234 ff., esp. 234-35, 238).

Wiseman relates the composition of his essays on the Tractarian movement and makes his most explicit claims for their effect on Newman in the prefaces to his three-volume essay collection, *Essays on Various Subjects* (1853). While I cannot prove that Newman himself read this work, he did recommend that one of his correspondents read it and, as I will shortly discuss, his own *Autobiographical Writings* describe Wiseman’s claims to authority over himself in terms that resonate strongly with *Essays on Various Subjects* (Newman “To Catherine Bathurst” 388). In the prefaces to *Essays on Various Subjects*, Wiseman comes closer to casting himself as a prophet than in any of his other work. Wiseman claims to have, alone among Englishmen, correctly read the “new signs in the religious firmament” that comprised the “Oxford movement” (Preface Vol. I viii).
Though other Catholics were skeptical and thought he was behaving like an “enthusiast” or “fanatic,” from 1833 on Wiseman gave the Tractarians “the uppermost place” in his thoughts and devoted much of his time to “to influenc[ing], if possible” the “direction” of their movement and to planning their conversion (Preface Vol. II vi-vii, Preface Vol. I viii). The highlight of this effort, Wiseman recalls, was meeting Newman on the field of the early Church and beating him in what amounts to a pitched military battle. He recollects both the apparent strength of the opposition and his own successful methods:

The entire system [the Via Media] was built with great apparent consistency, such as to deceive its very architect [Newman], who believed it to be planned and raised upon orthodox and primitive models. There could be little hope of undeceiving them [the Tractarians], except by pursuing them on to their own ground, and finding there the instruments of assault. Reasoning had to be met by reasoning; a mistaken, by a true, reading of antiquity. To undertake this work was the aim and undeviating purpose of the essays here collected together. (Wiseman Preface Vol. II viii)

Wiseman politely but exultantly reflects that “it would be ungrateful not to express what consolation has been derived from the information, after many years of unconsciousness, that they [his essays] had exercised a material influence on minds so infinitely superior, in every way, to their writer’s” and have aided their conversions to Catholicism (Preface II ix, cf. Preface I xii-xiii). Among the group of thinkers he influenced, Wiseman is pleased to count “most especially the honored and venerated Superior of the Oratory [of St. Philip de Neri]” and author of “the wonderful lectures on Anglican difficulties,” which is to say, Newman (Preface Vol. II ix).

Wiseman further asserts in the prefaces and notes to his essays that his influence over Newman does not end with Newman’s conversion; he also sets the direction of the
rest of Newman’s religious life. In a long footnote on his 1833 meeting with Newman in Rome, Wiseman relates that as a young man he had promised St. Philip de Neri
to introduce his beautiful Institute into England. But little could I foresee, when I received that most welcome visit, I was in company with its future founder . . . . [M]y early promise was not forgotten: and I record it, in gratitude and not for glory, that without violence or forwardness, my feelings respecting the modern ‘Apostle of Rome,’ led possibly to the first suggestion of what was soon spontaneously adopted, the introduction of the Oratory into England. (“Froude’s Remains” 93-94)

This unity of mind between bishop and priest has, according to Wiseman, continued unabated ever since. Wiseman indignantly denies the reports of “Protestant writers and Protestant speakers” that “unkindnesses, or jealousies, or doubtfulness, had arisen between some converts and myself” as “a simple untruth” (Preface Vol. II x). In sum, Wiseman’s writings, which were widely read, depict Newman as, under the Ultramontane thesis, he should have been: Wiseman’s Newman is a man who finds the truth when he abandons his own false beliefs and accepts the teachings of a Catholic bishop, and then spends the rest of his life propagating the truth that he has found. Wiseman’s Newman is a propagandist who has no right to each independently. If, in Newman’s well-known remark in the Apologia, Augustine’s statement about the Donatists pulverized the Via Media, it was only because Wiseman dug the statement up and worked out its present day application. The implications for Newman’s authority are both clear and disastrous.

Newman’s anxieties about Wiseman’s influence are discussed most openly in his Autobiographical Writings, particularly in the work known as The Journal, 1859-1879, which Newman wrote and preserved for possible publication in anticipation of a posthumous attack on his reputation by the Ultramontanes (Tristam 24-25, 143-44, cf. Newman Journal 273-74). Newman wrote that if this situation should arise, a friendly
The biographer should defend him by publishing this “journal”—which is not so much a conventional journal as a series of retrospective autobiographical vignettes, written at erratic intervals—together with other autobiographical pieces and letters relevant to his Catholic life. Since Newman, like Carlyle, feared losing to biographers his authority to interpret his own life, the hypothetical biographer’s role was to be restricted to writing the transitions needed to link Newman’s words together. Since *The Journal, 1859-1879* relates Newman’s life in a first person, retrospective manner, claims referentiality, and was intended for publication, for my purposes it can fairly be considered an autobiographical document.

*The Journal 1859-1879* is quite plain about the interpretive claim Wiseman possesses over Newman, and is quite bleak about its effect on Newman’s authority. The bulk of the discussion of Wiseman was written in January 1863, when Wiseman was still alive and at the height of his popularity, and when Newman was in the depths that preceded the *Apologia*. Here Newman depicts his conversion to Catholicism as a process of objectification, in which he ceases to be a thinking subject with a sage’s keen observing eye and interpretive prowess, and becomes instead an object in thrall to the Catholic gaze in general and to Wiseman’s interpretations in particular. Newman recollects that when he converted, he also granted a principle repeatedly articulated by Wiseman, and applied by him to the Anglican Newman: theologians who have changed their opinions about important matters have shown themselves unreliable, and are therefore not to be readily believed (cf. *Apologia* 160). Consequently, Newman renounced his own right to teach. He writes: “When I became a Catholic . . . . I determined, that it did not become one, who had taken a prominent part against the
Church, to be taking a prominent part against Anglicanism, but that my place was retirement. . . . ‘I broke my staff’; and the Cardinal [Wiseman] did not hinder it. Rather he co-operated,” especially by eventually placing Newman in semi-retirement at Birmingham (Journal 258).40 As a literary-critical diversion, the reader may imagine what a true Freudian critic might make of Wiseman helping Newman break his staff; it is sufficient for my purposes that whether the staff be considered in terms mythical (Merlin), literary (Shakespeare’s Tempest, the most likely reference), religious (the episcopal staff or Moses’s staff), or Freudian (the phallic staff), the staff signifies authority, and the broken staff signifies broken authority.

Fittingly, in the chronology of The Journal, we next find Newman entirely objectified and in Wiseman’s thrall. In the year following his conversion, Newman writes, “I was the gaze of so many eyes at Oscott [an English Catholic seminary], as if some wild incomprehensible beast, caught by the hunter, and a spectacle for Dr. Wiseman to exhibit to strangers, as himself being the hunter who captured it!” (Journal 255). Lord Acton considered Wiseman to have “a way” of “exhibiting the scalps’ of his converts,” and The Journal’s depiction of Wiseman’s tendency to publicize Newman’s bondage to him is every bit as graphic and as disturbing as the Apologia’s portrayal of Kingsley’s tendency to summon up phantom Newmans (qtd. in Fothergill 126).

In The Journal, Newman becomes throughout the 1850s less and less comfortable with his renunciation of his claim to teach, and gradually attempts to reassert in a modified form his right to interpret the world. He feels that his “powers” are best suited to a form of teaching that amounts almost to redefining Catholicism itself: his goal is to “educat[e]” Catholics “by a careful survey of their argumentative basis, of their position
relatively to the philosophy and the character of the day, by giving them juster views by enlarging & refining their minds” (Journal 258-59). As should be apparent, this language recalls The Idea of a University’s discussion of the prophetic role of the ideal philosopher. However, Newman’s attempts to teach in this manner are unsuccessful, for they are blocked by the Ultramontanes—particularly by Wiseman—to whom the idea of a prophetic interpreter outside the Pope seems unnecessary, and even subversive. To the Ultramontanes, Catholicism needs no revision, only propagation; since Newman’s attempts to refine Catholic teaching necessarily imply that Catholicism as it exists at present is “deficient in material points,” Newman’s writings are considered an “insult” to the Faith (Journal 259). Newman complains that even “Cardinal Wiseman”—who “might know something . . . were he not so . . . controversial & unphilosophic in his attitude of mind, so desirous to make himself agreeable to authorities at Rome”—refuses to acknowledge the need to recast Catholic philosophy and wants from Newman only “toadyism” and a steady stream of “conversions” from Protestantism (Journal 257-58, 273). In The Journal as in Wiseman’s prefaces and notes, Newman is taken by Wiseman to be not a prophet, but a propagandist and, as Newman points out, now that his “staff” is broken, he cannot serve even that role very well (258-59).

Trapped in Wiseman’s theological cage, Newman is no longer sufficiently free to write a work of prophetic power. His failure to meet the terms (intellectual submission and convert production) that many Catholics, especially “the Cardinal [Wiseman],” have placed on him cause him to be treated in most Catholic quarters with “opposition and distrust,” and this “opposition and distrust,” Newman laments, “have (to all appearance) succeeded in destroying my influence and usefulness” (Journal 256-57). Putting the
matter in more directly literary terms, Newman mournfully exclaims, “O my God, I seem to have wasted these years that I have been a Catholic. What I wrote as a Protestant has had far greater power, force, meaning, success, than my Catholic works—and this troubles me a great deal” (Journal 253). In a letter written about the same time as this section of The Journal, Newman blames Wiseman for a widespread report that his loss of influence is inalterable and unavoidable. He writes, “I know what the Cardinal [Wiseman] did say to Fr. Faber, and what Fr. Faber said to the world, viz. ‘that I had put myself on the shelf, and there was no help for it’” (“To Emily Bowles” 138). Still worse, as Newman recollects in a later passage of The Journal, “from 1859 to 1864,” from his delayed article on the laity “On Consulting the Faithful” to the Apologia, he is in a sufficiently difficult position in relation to the Catholic public and hierarchy that “it becomes [him] to be silent” (272). If Newman is Wiseman’s “spectacular beast,” the chain around his neck is now pulled so tightly that he cannot even speak. Having with his conversion in 1845 lost his prophetic voice, by 1859 he has lost his authorial voice altogether.

It is hard to see how Newman could redeem his authority from this situation; it does seem that there is “no help for it.” He is not free to simply rebel against the restrictions placed upon him by the ecclesiastical authorities and remain Catholic, and even if he were to rebel, this action would not erase the influence Wiseman has had on his thought and life, which Wiseman has been careful to publicize. For a sage to accept another’s reading of his thought and life is for a sage to be mastered, to become an object in another’s interpretive system; however much Newman might dislike this situation, since his conversion was publicly influenced by Wiseman and Wiseman is his superior,
he remains doubly in Wiseman’s thrall. To this massive problem for Newman’s
authority, *The Journal* envisions only one solution—the death of Wiseman.

The next section of *The Journal* is dated February 22, 1865—as Newman himself
observes, a week after Wiseman’s death and a day before his burial—and it depicts
Newman’s authority as suddenly restored (261, 262). Newman writes that his “position of
mind” is very “different from what it was” when he last wrote in the manuscript (in
1863), and it differs primarily in that his sense of the futility of his writing and life has
disappeared (*Journal* 260). Instead of despairing of the potential of his writing to
influence anyone, Newman is now, if anything, tempted “to value the praise of men” he
has been receiving too highly (*Journal* 261). He designates three causes as having
brought about this dramatic change:

> First, I have got hardened against the opposition made to me, and have not the
soreness at my ill treatment on the part of certain influential Catholics which I had
then. . . . Next, the two chief persons, whom I felt to be unjust to me, are gone—
the Cardinal [Wiseman] & [the Ultramontane devotional writer, poet, and fellow
Oratian Frederick] Faber . . . . Thirdly, in the last year a most wonderful
deliverance has been wrought in my favour, by the controversy, of which the
upshot was my *Apologia*. (260)

Newman’s first two causes are clearly connected; with Wiseman dead, no one has
an inherent interpretive claim over Newman, and Newman’s interpretation of
Catholicism is as good as any in England. This being the case, Newman can now harden
himself to the Catholic opposition he faces; it need not destroy his authority. If Manning
is now “the Cardinal” and opposes Newman ardently, Manning converted late and has
suffered little, and so has more ecclesiastical but less moral authority than Newman.
Newman observes that while “Manning” has “taken” the “place” of Wiseman both as
Cardinal and as his rival, “somehow,” since he has never been “closely in contact” with
Manning, Manning’s opposition never causes him the “sense of cruelty” that Wiseman’s did (Journal 260). To restate Newman’s observation in terms of my critical model, while Wiseman’s writing and actions could always penetrate Newman’s intellectual defenses (coming “closely in contact” with Newman’s person) and inflict damage (“a sense of cruelty”) on his self and authorship, Manning’s writings and actions, backed only by the authority of office, cannot. With Wiseman dead, Newman is no worse position in the Catholic Church than he possessed in the Anglican Church; he is again a loved and feared party leader at war with other party leaders. As Newman observes, in addition to having “regained . . . the favour of Protestants,” he seems to have suddenly earned “the approbation” of a “good part” of the English [Catholic] clerical body” (Journal 260). As he is adept at clerical conflict, Newman’s remaining opposition does not destroy his authority to interpret. He even manages—most famously in the Letter to Pusey—to interpret Manning’s literary attacks on him as endorsements that the public has merely misunderstood (Newman Letter to Pusey 10). Though he still faces significant opposition from Manning and Ward, Newman observes that his “feeling of despondency & irritation seems to have gone” (Journal 261). After Wiseman’s burial, nothing like Newman’s 1863 sense of black despair about his authorship and authority occurs in The Journal.

IV: An “Intellect . . . Nothing Can Startle”: The Apologia’s Erasure of Wiseman’s Influence and Restoration of Newman’s Sage Authority

Since I have shown that the first two causes of Newman’s resumption of authority in The Journal—his indifference to the Catholic opposition and the death of Wiseman—
are linked, it is reasonable to assume that the third cause, the *Apologia*, is also connected to the others. *The Journal, 1859-1879* recuperates Newman’s authority to some extent through its portrayal of a Newman who through all his changes of thought and religion struggles to maintain and, when necessary, regain an impressive capacity for original and independent thought. However, its narrative of a Newman who is powerless until Wiseman is removed from the picture not by Newman’s interpretive prowess but by nature’s deus ex machina, death, still leaves Newman dependent for his authority on circumstances beyond his control. The restoration of Newman’s authority is effected much more successfully in the better known *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, written while Wiseman was slowly dying. One of the hidden goals of the *Apologia*, I argue, is the erasure of Wiseman—the elimination of his influence, and his literary burial. The *Apologia* tells the same story as *The Journal*, but more successfully and in a more classically Harold Bloom, anxiety-of-influence fashion, by omission rather than narration.

Although readers and critics since Ward and Manning themselves have seen the *Apologia* as in part an attack on the Ultramontanes, this element of the work has not been greatly explored because it has been thought to exist only in Chapter V—the philosophical treatise “The Position of My Mind Since 1845”—and to therefore possess little bearing on the work’s narrative elements, save perhaps on the thematic stress on Englishness (cf., for example, Kelly 32, J. Derek Holmes “Newman’s” 23). This misreading is due, I argue, to two principal misconceptions: 1. The critical tendency, from Lytton Strachey on, to conceive Victorian Catholicism so entirely in terms of a Newman/Manning binary as to seriously misestimate the importance of Newman’s other
Catholic rivals and 2. The critical tendency to assume that, since Ultramontanism seems religiously fanatical by the standards of the current Western intellectual culture, Ultramontanism does not require sustained analysis as a philosophy with significant and coherent epistemological and metaphysical commitments of its own.43 The first misconception has caused critics to overlook the important place that Wiseman occupies in the *Apologia*, while the second has caused critics to miss the very specific religious and philosophical context of the *Apologia*’s famous attacks on abstract logic.

Wiseman’s role is notable in the *Apologia*, though more by the contortions necessary to secure his absence than by his presence. Though the *Apologia* provides a clear portrayal of Wiseman, he appears in the narrative only a handful of times. Accounts of Newman’s 1833 meeting with Wiseman in Rome had already been published in Hurrell Froude’s *Remains* and in several of Wiseman’s works, so the *Apologia* is obligated to address the event to retain narrative credibility. Newman mentions that he and Froude made an exception to their general rule against talking to Catholics to meet twice with “Monsignore (now Cardinal) Wiseman at the Collegio Inglese” and once to “hea[r] him preach” (*Apologia* 38-39). Newman portrays himself as at this time feeling great “isolation” from the people and religion of Italy, and as thinking “solely” of England (*Apologia* 39). In a similar vein, the only detail he relates from these meetings is his refusal of Wiseman’s suggestion that he and Froude visit Rome again and see more of Wiseman. Newman tells Wiseman that “‘We [Newman and Froude] have a work to do in England,’” and that such a visit would only delay their mission (*Apologia* 40). When Wiseman next appears in the *Apologia*, he has returned to England, and has started giving controversial lectures explaining why Tractarians should convert to

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Catholicism (*Apologia* 61). These lectures influence Newman only in that the need to combat them comprises one of the most “important” “reason[s]” that he is inspired to devise his influential theory of the Via Media, in which the Anglican Church’s doctrinal moderation is contrasted with the Roman Church’s doctrinal excesses and Protestantism’s doctrinal deficiencies, with the aim of revealing Anglicanism as the true heir of the Conciliar Church (*Apologia* 61). Wiseman’s third and final personal appearance in the *Apologia* occurs when shortly before his conversion Newman writes Wiseman to defend himself from the explicit charge “of coldness in [his] conduct towards” Wiseman, and from the possible implicit charge of wishing, in a spirit of “controversial rivalry,” to “get the better” of Wiseman (*Apologia* 144). The *Apologia*’s portrayal of Wiseman as a character is terse, but clear and consistent. Wiseman constantly attempts to influence Newman, but Newman rebuffs his advances, declines his influence, and is affected by him only as providing the material occasion of his own Via Media.

Newman accentuates the key aspects of this portrait of Wiseman by foiling him with other Catholic priests who are both less obtrusive and more successful in attempting to convert Newman. Most prominently, Wiseman is implicitly foiled in both results and methods with “Dr. [Charles] Russell of Maynooth [Seminary]” who is designated as having “more to do with [Newman’s] conversion than any one else” (Newman *Apologia* 153). In contrast to Wiseman’s penchant for theological debate, Russell achieved this end because he simply sent Newman “one or two books,” wrote him “several” “gentle, mild, unobtrusive, uncontroversial letters,” and in general “let [him] alone” (*Apologia* 153). In relating the event of his conversion, Newman downplays his confirmation at the hands of and act of submission to the local bishop (Wiseman), mentioning the latter once
in passing well before the end of the narrative and the former not at all (Newman *Apologia* 52, cf. Ker *John Henry Newman* 317). Newman emphasizes instead his reception into the Catholic Church—which invariably includes first confession and first communion—at the hands of the Passionist priest, Fr. Dominic Barberi. In contrast to Wiseman, the model for Browning’s Bishop Blougram,44 “Father Dominic . . . . “is a simple, holy man” who “has had little to do with conversions”; in fact, Father Dominic had never spoken to Newman for more than “a few minutes” prior to his conversion and had no advance knowledge of Newman’s “intention” to convert (*Apologia* 181).

In sum, the Wiseman of the *Apologia* may be able by virtue of his office to move Newman about physically—from Oxford to Oscott, Oscott to Rome, Rome to Birmingham (182)— but has no intellectual or spiritual effect on him at all. Only those who do not attempt to influence Newman can play a role in his development, and Wiseman’s attempts at influence only render him ridiculous. My reading of the *Apologia*’s portrayal of Wiseman as a critique has been, so far as I am aware, anticipated by only one critic: Wiseman himself. Terminally ill and worried about his standing with posterity, Wiseman drafted the beginnings of an essay intended to defend himself against the *Apologia*, but the essay was never completed, was soon lost, and was not discovered and published for well over one hundred years (Schieffen 332-33, 378).45

The sticking point, of course, for the *Apologia*’s confident portrayal of a touchy, nagging Wiseman spurned by a self-contained Newman is Wiseman’s “Catholic and Anglican Churches” essay (August 1839), which was publicly known to have influenced Newman’s conversion. Newman discusses this essay in a passage whose rhetorical complexity and importance to the *Apologia*’s model of authority merit a thorough
explication. Immediately prior to this passage, Newman informs his readers that by “the 30th of July” 1839 his own study of the Monophysite controversy had caused him to question the validity of the Via Media (Apologia 96). In this ecclesiastical battle about whether Christ had one (divine) nature or two (one divine and one human) natures, the moderates had not proven to be the orthodox party, an event that suggests by analogy the falsity of the Via Media. Newman is disturbed to question his own theory and church, but his questions are caused by his dialogical interaction with ecclesiastical history and his analogical rather than strictly logical method of reasoning, and so are consonant with his criteria for a true development or legitimate intellectual growth. His internal coherence and authority are complicated, but not undermined. When Newman looks “in the mirror” and sees that he is a “Monophysite,” he has at least by his own research positioned and arranged the mirror (Apologia 96).

Newman attempts to control Wiseman’s influence by casting his article as the source of the second of the historical parallels that throws the Via Media into doubt, and by treating Augustine rather than Wiseman as the author of the article. The first move makes Wiseman’s article an influence only insofar as it corroborates a course of thought on which Newman had already embarked, and the second move reattributes whatever influence the article may have had on Newman to a venerated Apostolic Father rather than a contemporary and rival. Newman emphasizes that, while his own analogy between the Monophysites and the Anglicans had been devised in July, Wiseman’s analogies between the Donatists and the Anglicans were not printed until August and not seen by Newman until a friend gave him the essay in “the middle of September”
Thus, Wiseman’s observations could not have determined Newman’s thoughts but, rather, were assimilated into a theory Newman was already forming.

The transfer of the essay’s authorship from Wiseman to Augustine is equally effective for the purpose of preserving Newman’s authority, but more bizarre and more rhetorically stunning. When Newman initially reads the “article . . . on the ‘Anglican Claim,’” “Dr. Wiseman” is the author, and the essay serves only as an example of Wiseman’s poor reasoning skills (Apologia 98). As Newman recalls, “I read it [“The Catholic and Anglican Churches”] and did not see much in it,” because “the case [of the Donatist schism] was not parallel to that of the Anglican Church” (Apologia 98). To briefly relate Newman’s reasons for this judgment, the Donatist controversy involved a local North African quarrel about which bishop had the right to a given see, while the Anglican secession—and the Monophysite controversy—instead involved a unified series of sees in a contained geographical area operating outside of the jurisdiction of the rest of the Church (Apologia 98).

When Newman turns to discussing how “The Catholic and Anglican Churches” influenced him, the article’s authorship suddenly switches from Wiseman to St. Augustine and its content metamorphoses from invalid to invaluable. The passage is worth quoting at some length. Newman recollects that the “friend” who had given him the article,

a Protestant still, pointed out to me the palmary words of St. Augustine, which were contained in one of the extracts made in the [Dublin] Review, and which had escaped my observation. ‘Securus judicat orbis terrarum.’ He repeated these words again and again, and, when he was gone, they kept ringing in my ears. ‘Securus judicat orbis terrarum;’ they were words which went beyond the occasion of the Donatists: they applied to that of the Monophysites. They gave a cogency to the Article, which had escaped me at first. They decided ecclesiastical
questions on a simpler rule than that of Antiquity; nay, St. Augustine was one of the prime oracles of Antiquity; here then was Antiquity deciding against itself . . .

the deliberate judgement, in which the whole Church at length rests and acquiesces, is an infallible prescription and a final sentence against such portions of it as protest and secede. Who can account for the impressions which are made on him? For a mere sentence, the words of St. Augustine, struck me with a power which I never had felt from any words before . . . By those great words of the ancient Father, interpreting and summing up the long and varied course of ecclesiastical history, the theory of the Via Media was absolutely pulverized. (98-99, emphasis mine)

In this passage, the longish article Wiseman had written disappears, and is replaced by a single sentence written by St. Augustine. Newman repeatedly refers to “the words of Saint Augustine,” never again mentions Wiseman, and is careful to maintain the severance of Augustine’s words from Wiseman’s essay. When Newman reads “the Catholic and Anglican Churches,” he misses the quotation from Augustine; consequently, he encounters the saint’s dictum primarily through the voice of his “still Protestant friend” rather than through Wiseman’s text. Even the application of Augustine’s “palmary sentence” to the rest of “ecclesiastical history” is attributed to the saint himself, although, as I have shown, Wiseman had explicitly dubbed the statement a “general rule” for “all future possible divisions” and had said that it “should be an axiom in theology” (“Catholic and Anglican” 217, 224-25). As written by Augustine, the article has a real “cogency,” and its words have an oracular power that ultimately determines Newman’s destiny. Since the article is— with Newman’s study of the Monophysites—one of a series of converging probabilities pointing in the same direction, and since the article is written by a Church Father, its influence over Newman, while remarkable, fits easily into his developmental model and into the Apologia’s narrative structure. Newman had long cast history as the central discipline, and ecclesiastical history as the center of this

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discipline, and it is only fitting for him to be himself forcibly shaped by ecclesiastical
history. The article fits into Newman’s gradual development in the Apologia by making
Tract 90 and its reception more intellectually crucial, as new proof of the connection
between the Anglican Church and the Church of the Fathers is needed now that the Via
Media has collapsed (Apologia 107-8).

However, if the Via Media falls not under the words of the revered “Ancient
Father,” Saint Augustine, but under the words of the Victorian Cardinal, Nicholas
Wiseman, Newman’s authority comes crashing down alongside it. One of Newman’s
concluding metaphors for the effect Augustine’s words had on him is that he “had seen
the shadow of a hand upon the wall” (Apologia 99). This metaphorical hand directly
proclaims the death of Newman’s Via Media and foretells his conversion to Catholicism;
this metaphorical hand indirectly leaves him a theologian without a theological system
and renders “the reins” of his authority over his followers “broken in [his] hands”
(Apologia 99, 101, 106). In the implied allusion to the book of Daniel the hand is God’s,
in the direct context the hand is Augustine’s; in either case, Newman’s authority is
temporarily disturbed and momentarily thrown, but the principles on which it is erected
are not undermined. If, however, this hand were Wiseman’s, both the Darwinians’ model
of development and the Ultramontanes’ model of ecclesiastical authority would be
vindicated at Newman’s expense. The Apologia’s narrative would essentially be that of
The Journal, 1859-79, where Wiseman, the dominant Father, has broken Newman’s staff
(here, “reins”), and his overpowering influence can be escaped only by his death. By the
strange but deftly handled tactic of absenting Wiseman from the more persuasive parts of
his own essay, Newman avoids this tremendous threat. The successfulness of Newman’s
rhetoric in his discussion of the “Catholic and Anglican Churches” essay is evidenced by the general tendency of literary critics to interpret the passage as if it were a narrative of Newman reading the work of Augustine rather than a narrative of Newman reading the work of a contemporary who references Augustine. In this famous passage, Newman frees himself from Wiseman’s influence by a misreading of his ecclesiastical precursor’s work, a misreading so flamboyant, persuasive, and inaccurate that it should satisfy the standards of even Harold Bloom himself.46

Just as Newman follows up his flanking of Kingsley’s position with an attack on empiricism as a whole, so he follows up his end run around Wiseman’s thought by proceeding to neutralize deduction as a whole. Newman’s attacks on “paper logic” in the Apologia should be seen as both consonant with his own anti-Cartesian philosophy and as a response to Ultramontane Catholic theology’s use of deduction to interpret, and usually deauthorize, his life and work. While the former element of these attacks has often been noticed by critics,47 the latter element has escaped critical observation. Newman attacks logic in the Apologia on the same basic grounds employed in The Idea of a University: deductive logic, being abstract, can determine true principles, but is inherently limited by its inability to determine the concrete, and must be balanced by other means of knowing. “There is great difference between a conclusion in the abstract and a conclusion in the concrete, and . . . a conclusion may be modified in fact by a conclusion from some opposite principle” (Newman Apologia 136). On the same note, Newman witheringly mocks the desire to give logic priority over all other forms of thought, and suggests that this desire is both reductive and small-minded. He attributes most of the erratic behavior of the younger generation of the Oxford Movement to this reductive stress on logic,
observing that “One is not at all pleased when poetry, or eloquence, or devotion, is considered as if chiefly intended to feed syllogisms” (Newman Apologia 136-37). He attributes his own tentative and sometimes later revoked statements from 1841 to 1843 in part to his being relentlessly questioned about the implications of his theories by the younger Oxonians who “introduc[ed] . . . logic into every subject whatever” (Newman Apologia 136). Since, as the Apologia recognizes, the intellectual chief of the younger generation of the Oxford Movement was the future Ultramontanist W. G. Ward, this portrayal of 1840s Oxford can be seen to double as a discussion of Newman’s 1864 theological rivals (Newman Apologia 137).

Newman’s famous attack on paper logic occurs in the middle of this very ecclesiologically specific passage. Working off the aforementioned division between the abstract and the concrete, Newman makes the rather Kierkegaardian point that since the life of an individual is by definition concrete, it cannot be deduced, and to expect an individual to act simply according to logic is reductive. The Catholics like Cardinal Wiseman and Protestants like the Reverend Stanley Faber who think that, given his premises, Newman should have converted more quickly are invalidly applying logic outside its proper bounds (Apologia 147, 178). In an often quoted passage, Newman writes:

I had a great dislike of paper logic. For myself, it was not logic that carried me on; as well might one say that the quicksilver in the barometer changes the weather. It is the concrete being that reasons; pass a number of years, and I find my mind in a new place; how? the whole man moves; paper logic is but the record of it. All the logic in the world would not have made me move faster towards Rome than I did; as well might you say that I have arrived at the end of my journey, because I see the village church before me, as venture to assert that the miles, over which my soul had to pass before it got to Rome, could be annihilated,
even though I had been in possession of some far clearer view than I then had, that Rome was my ultimate destination. Great acts take time. (*Apologia* 136)

To transfer Newman’s comments into literary terms, just as a pure logician could not imagine the motives and actions of a concrete individual and so could not write an effective novel, a pure logician for the same reasons could not write an effective biography or autobiography. In this passage, Newman’s agonizingly slow movement towards Catholicism, with a step and a half back for every two steps forward, and masses of issues—personal, historical and theoretical—considered at every step, serves as a vindication of gradualist narrative itself (cf., for instance, *Apologia* 167-68, 176-77). Just as Newman’s model of history serves as a means of avoiding the pitfalls of both logic with its ignorance of the concrete and empiricism with its ignorance of hermeneutics, his autobiography—“the history of his religious opinions”—avoids the pitfalls of both the reductively allegorical mode of narration often seen in spiritual autobiographies and the nihilistically (and tediously) materialistic mode of narration sometimes seen in realist autobiographies (one thinks especially of Trollope). The means by which the *Apologia* fends off the epistemologies of Newman’s rivals also account for its instant and lasting literary success, its common critical designation as the best autobiography of its era.

Newman has fought off the empiricist and Darwinian implications of realism by means of his own model of development, and has rebuffed the authoritarian and Ultramontane implications of deductive theology in order to defend this same theory. It is only fitting, then, that, having contained the threat of these epistemologies and the authors associated with them, the *Apologia* fully restores Newman’s internal coherence and interpretive authority by narrating his invention of theory of the *Development of*
Christian Doctrine. Newman’s previous theology had been destroyed with the downfall of the Via Media in 1839, but by 1842 he has begun to form a new theological system: the “principle of the development of doctrine in the Christian Church” (Apologia 155). As I have already discussed, Newman’s theory posits that, under “divine guidance,” the Catholic Church is able to devise new doctrines that are continuous with its primitive doctrines, but that also account for new knowledge and experience (Apologia 156). Just as a similar process of continuous, internally motivated development preserves the unity and coherence of Newman’s self and authority, “the principle of development” gives Catholic teaching a “unity and individuality” not possessed by other faiths (Apologia 156). Weary of his continual see-sawing towards and away from the Catholic Church, Newman resolves “at the end of 1844” to write “an Essay on Doctrinal Development; and then, if, at the end of it, my convictions in favour of the Roman Church were not weaker, of taking the necessary steps for admission into her fold” (Apologia 177). Newman begins this work in early 1845, and by October he has “so cleared away” his “difficulties” that has “resolved to be received” into the Catholic Church (Apologia 181).

Newman again has a theology, and his conversion, rather than representing a loss of his ability to theorize originally (as was thought by Protestants and Ultramontane Catholics alike), comes as a consequence of his most original theory. Newman’s invention of the theory of the development of Christian doctrine ensures that his own development possesses the notes of assimilative power and continuity of type, and is not merely controlled by external forces. Lord Acton, though he often distrusted Newman and hated Wiseman, best observed the ways in which The Development of Doctrine implicitly defends Newman’s prophetic authority against Wiseman’s ecclesiastical
Acton realizes that “the ideal of development” was “a revolution; it gave him [Newman] the air of a person who to satisfy himself demanded a theory specially thought out to suit himself. . . . Wiseman said of him, he was of an impossible arrogance—and development was the reason for the hard mot” (Chadwick 136). In short, Newman converts only when he has found a way to convert that is consistent with his own interpretive authority. When he comments at the beginning of Chapter V, “I was not conscious . . . on my conversion, of any change, intellectual or moral, wrought in my mind,” he proclaims the victory of the *Apologia*’s entire narrative (184).

With Newman’s conversion related and his authority restored, the narrative portion of the *Apologia* comes to a close. The *Apologia* was originally issued in weekly installments that sold well and that were immediately (and largely favorably) reviewed in the press. In Chapter V, “The Position of My Mind Since 1845,” Newman uses the success of the earlier installments of the *Apologia* to resume his authority as a sage. The *Apologia*’s final chapter is a philosophical treatise that interprets the whole of reality for the reader, and which is perhaps best known for its erudite and skeptical defenses of Catholicism. Newman offers an alternately dizzying and inspiring vision of a world sufficiently anarchic to seem meaningless and a faith sufficiently keen-eyed to see transcendent meaning through seeming chaos, a vision sublime in its heights and depths (*Apologia* 186-89). The truth or falsity of this vision is not to my purpose here; I am concerned with the existence of this vision. Newman, having begun the *Apologia* lacking interpretive control over even his own life narrative, is now charting the universe for his readers. Newman, who for over twenty years had endured public contempt and who for the last five years had considered it futile to write at all, again assumes the magisterial
authority of the sage. Now he can openly contest the field with empirical science, reducing knowledge of “physics” to a mere “knowledge” of “phenomena,” and deeming the material sciences to be at the moment too devoid of fixed positions to even engage him in a proper battle (Newman Apologia 185, 201). Now he can treat the ecclesiastical authorities who had effectually silenced him—and, implicitly, this silencing itself—as proofs of his own intellectual system. Newman explains that the role of ecclesiastical authority is to ensure that original ideas are publicly proclaimed at the “right time,” for an abstract truth proclaimed at an “unseasonable” time amounts to a concrete heresy, as the people as a whole will misunderstand it (Newman Apologia 198-99). In other words, the censures of ecclesiastical authority are a part of the economy, for they delay the utterance of thoughts until they can be successfully heard (Newman Apologia 201-3). Even Newman’s worst opponents are now merely examples of his ideas. The final pages of the Apologia formally refute the charge that Newman is a liar, but the whole of Chapter V has assumed his mastery over the truth.

In The Idea of a University, Newman had declared that because the true philosopher is able to synthesize all new knowledge and experience into his intellectual system, he is able to live “above the influences of chance and necessity, above anxiety [and] unsettlement” (124-25). The possessor of “true philosophy” is “majestically calm,” for “nothing can startle” his “intellect” (Idea 127-28). In a stark antithesis, the half-educated are, however, “possessed by their knowledge, not possessors of it,” for their “intellect[s]” are disturbed and “prey[ed]” upon by “barren facts” and “random intrusions from without” (Idea 127-28). The true philosopher, we should remember, is Newman’s version of the sage. Rephrased in terms of my critical method, this passage suggests that
while the average thinker is prone to intellectual trauma, since ideas, data, and experiences for which he cannot account are constantly emerging in this ever-changing world, the sage should be immune to intellectual trauma, since he should be able to account for all possible ideas, data, and experiences within the terms of his system. Whether the actual Newman ever achieved this ideal state is unknowable, but by the end of the *Apologia*—in which, as we have seen, even his literary disasters and intellectual rivals serve to illustrate his philosophical system—Newman for the first time has written a version of himself that literally enacts this ideal.

After taking up his sage authority once more, Newman never laid it down again. The success of his publications after 1864 is staggering. *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1865 restored Newman to prominence as a poet and writer; the *Letter to Pusey* in 1866 vindicated his right to speak for the Catholic Church with a successful attack on the theology of Manning and Faber; the *Grammar of Assent* in 1870 established Newman as an important philosopher and has influenced philosophers as late as Wittgenstein, who opens *On Certainty* with an allusion to Newman; and the *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* in 1874 both defended the Vatican I-era Catholic Church against the assaults of Liberal politicians (primarily Gladstone), and, by limiting the conditions and scope of papal infallibility, turned back the Ultramontane advance when its victory seemed already achieved. Newman’s cardinalate in 1878 was merely the last in the long string of successes that began with the *Apologia* in 1864.

The story of Newman’s dramatic literary resurgence, effected by means of the *Apologia*, is perhaps even better known than the work itself. The *Apologia*’s legacy is a glittering ideal of the compromised and misunderstood sage who, if he could only tell
aright the story of his loss of authority—which is to say, if he could only account
successfully in terms of his own intellectual system for the texts that create, narrate, and
perpetuate his literary fall—would regain his authority and be restored to his intellectual
prime. This ideal, of achieving by means of autobiographical narration a literary persona
that is invulnerable to intertextual trauma, is one to which each of the sages in this study
aspire. Though Newman offers no replicable model for enacting this ideal (for, as I have
shown, the work’s success depends on a very specific rhetorical situation, philosophy,
and set of opponents), the Apologia, as both the first and the only indisputably successful
work of its type, stands before later sages as both a model for and a temptation to the
daunting task of the intertextual sage autobiography.

1 The one possible exception to this rule is Newman’s rivalry with his fellow convert-cardinal Henry
Edward Manning, which has interested critics since Lytton Strachey. However, Manning in 1864 was not
yet a cardinal and had not yet reached the height of his influence. Hence, he does not pose a direct problem
for the Apologia and is rarely mentioned and never discussed in the work.
2 In discussing Newman’s philosophy, I will employ The Idea of a University and The Development of
Doctrine, although they were not yet written when the Tract 90 controversy occurred, and the Grammar of
Assent and On the Inspiration of Scripture, although they were not yet written when the Apologia was
published. I justify the use of these texts on the following grounds: 1. The core ideas for each of these
works are contained in Newman’s University Sermons, which was published while the Tract 90
controversy was still on-going. I use the full works rather than the sermons simply because their greater
length lends them more easily to systemization. 2. The Grammar of Assent was begun in 1860, prior to the
Apologia, and was published in 1870, prior to the conclusion of The Journal, 1859-1879 (cf. Jost
Rhetorical Thought 63). The Grammar thus precedes or is contemporaneous with both of the
autobiographical texts I am analyzing. 3. Likewise, Newman worked out most of the thoughts later
included in his essays On the Inspiration of Scripture in an abandoned project on scriptural inspiration
written between 1861 and 1863 (J. Derek Holmes “Inspiration” 18-22). It is therefore not anachronistic to
use the concepts of this volume to understand the Apologia, and I have used no ideas from it not contained
in the earlier, abandoned work.
3 Cf. Idea of a University 45, where on a similar logic, Newman asserts that no one can really know anyone
else.
4 For this reason, the Grammar of Assent is based off a “pragmatic phenomenology” of belief rather than an
attempt to come up with a normative ideal of knowledge (Schmidt 7).
5 For the same point made in satirical fashion, see Newman’s novel Callista, where the sophist Polema
proves from the “facts” that the Roman empire can never fall (311).
6 Many critics who write on The Idea of the University seem to approach the text with such strong pre-
existing assumptions about what Newman will say that they miss this point, among others. In an anthology
of essays on The Idea of a University published by Yale Press, Sara Castro-Klaren asserts that Newman

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depicts “theology as the science of sciences” that should dominate the university, an assertion that runs counter to all textual evidence (319).

Starting in the late 1850s, newspapers reported and rumors circulated that Newman was in trouble with his bishop and with Rome; for many these rumors seemed to simply confirm that Newman was a closet nihilist who acknowledged no authority or reality outside himself. As an Anglican, Newman was famous for preaching that a bishop was “a divinely-ordained channel of supernatural grace” to whom he makes “an unreserved and joyful submission,” and then strictly examining the Bishop of Oxford’s commands to minimize the scope and purview of his orders (Newman Letter to Oxford 34, cf. Apologia 240-41). By 1862, Newman was publicly in a similar position with regard to the Catholic Bishop of Birmingham, William Ullathorne. Ullathorne had condemned The Rambler, a Liberal Catholic periodical with which Newman had associated; Newman refused to publicly criticize the decision but also refused to endorse it, which gave some offense (Altholz 195). Far from unconditionally submitting to his superiors, Newman in the 1850s in a novel praised the vowed religious life for possessing, unlike marriage, “distinct provisos and regulations . . . to secure . . . against tyranny on the part of . . . superiors” (Newman Callista 122). In a published sermon of the same period, he rebuked the misconceptions of those who, considering the divine claims of the Catholic Church to apply only to its “external and political structure,” assume that that Catholic priests are motivated by “the desire . . . of the praise of earthly superiors” (Newman “Secret Power” 56-57). In part due to these reservations about ecclesiastical authority, was accused by many of his coreligionists of being “still partly Protestant in spirit” (Kelly 29).

Newman’s essay in July 1859 Rambler, “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine,” which extended the concept of infallibility to the laity and said the laity could be trusted to preserve true doctrine when the hierarchy failed, was delated to Rome on suspicion of heresy, and Newman seemingly refused to submit an explanation of his articles to the Roman authorities for their judgment (Altholz 109-10, Newman “On Consulting” 408-17). Though Newman did write an explanation of his conduct for the Roman authorities, Cardinal Wiseman, for reasons that remain unclear, failed to send it on to Rome (this aspect of the situation was not known at the time, however) (Altholz 110).

In view of Newman’s apparent refusal to submit to the Catholic authorities, even his friend Pusey would publicly observe in 1866 (after the Apologia but before the end of The Journal, 1859-79), “I cannot imagine how any faith could stand the shock of leaving one system, criticizing it, and cast himself into another system, criticizing it”; “One who, by his own act, places himself under authority cannot make conditions about his submission” (qtd. in Newman Letter to Pusey 17, 18, emphasis Pusey’s). To many, much more than to Pusey, Newman was something of a cult leader who acknowledged no authority higher than himself, be it reason, empirical evidence, the Bible, or the Pope. James Adams theorizes that a tension in Newman’s thought and rhetoric between the ideals of the iconoclastic prophet and the reverent priest was responsible for Newman’s inability to either simply submit to or simply defy church authorities, a trait that confused both friends and foes (94).


See also The Dream of Gerontius, section four, where the demons make very similar charges against the redeemed soul as Elizabeth Harris against Catholics.

In addition to the passages I have already referenced, see Newman’s remark that it is “A Form of the Infidelity of the Day” to hold that to reach valid conclusions a science must either “advance from sure premises to sure conclusions” (deduction) or “form your undeniable facts into system, arrive at general principles, and then infallibly apply them” (empiricism) (Idea 348).

The exceptions to this rule—such as Lord Acton, a Catholic advocate of “scientific history,” who preferred the “inductive method” to the “syllogism” and who by 1864 distrusted Newman for many of the
same reasons that Kingsley did—serve only to underscore that epistemology rather than denominational allegiance is the primary issue in these condemnations of Newman (Altholz 42).

12 Carlyle’s influence on Kingsley has often been noted since the Victorian period; most pithily, the New Quarterly Review dubbed him “Carlyle made easy, and even partially orthodox” (qtd. in Hawley 134).

13 In this aspect of his theology, Kingsley appears to fulfill Newman’s assertion that the logical end of the effort to find God by means of the material world is pantheism (Idea 412).

14 Kingsley’s tendency to equate physical health with spiritual worth is an extension of the same principle to the human (Hypatia 313, 366).

15 See also Newman’s own observation in The Idea of a University that “Protestantism treats Scripture just as they deal with Nature; it takes the sacred text as a large collection of phenomena, from which, by an inductive process, each individual Christian may arrive at just those religious conclusions which approve themselves to his own judgement” (204).

16 Newman himself had observed that Scripture has “a structure so unsystematic and various; and a style so figurative and indirect,” that without an infallible Church to interpret it, the meaning of the Bible must forever remain unclear (Development Longmans ed. 68, 72; Inspiration 111).

17 See also Hypatia 120-21, where Kingsley mocks non-literal readings of texts as being both pagan and deluded; given the other analogies between Hypatia and Newman, Kingsley’s satire is particularly telling.

18 Elizabeth Jay seems to suggest an antithetical view of Kingsley to my own, when she casts him as a chief opponent of the rise in realism in her study The Religion of the Heart (5). While in Jay’s terms Kingsley is not a realist, for his novels include both authorial intrusions and openly stated morals, Kingsley—as I have shown—does center his novels around the same elements of Victorian science that inspire the realist novel. Jay asserts that Kingsley’s “remarks [on the need for authorial intrusion in a narrative] show how, at worst, the use of the novel as a forum for proselytizing activities stemmed from a contempt for the public’s capacity for concentrated thought” (Jay 5). Contrary to my own claims, Jay also implies that Kingsley held himself to be a privileged interpreter of reality. However, even the letter that Jay quotes to establish this point does not claim a privileged interpretive position for its author, if it is read in full. Kingsley does, as Jay notes, justify narrative intrusion on the grounds that many readers are “too stupid and in too great a hurry, to interpret the most puzzling facts for themselves” and that women enjoy them (qtd. in Jay 5).

However, Kingsley goes on to explain that when he interjects commentary into a novel this discursion is not intended to be “an obstruction of the author’s self” but an attempt “to speak . . . the thoughts of many hearts, to put into words for his readers what they would have said for themselves if they could” (Kingsley “To George Brimley” 41). Essentially, then, Kingsley’s interjections are—for males of average intelligence, at least—a time saving device, whereby men who do not have the time to bother to interpret are spared the trouble of interpretation by Kingsley, and Kingsley as author simply says what the males of average intelligence would themselves have said, had they the time, literary ability, and inclination to do so.


20 As Kingsley plainly says, “I am not bound to find motives for Dr. Newman’s eccentricities” (What, Then 326).

21 The apparent difference between Schramm’s account of the self-interpreting fact, in which the phenomenon dies before the on-set of the Victorian period, and Dalston and Gallistion’s account, in which the phenomenon actually gains force as the century goes on, is entirely, I think, derived from their divergent sources of evidence—the legal system for Schramm and science for Dalston and Galliston (cf. Schramm 185-86). That influential sectors of the same society could be at odds regarding basic questions of epistemology marks a transitional society like the Victorian, and is part of the unique cultural climate of the Victorian sages.

22 See also Newman’s pamphlet The True Mode of Meeting Mr. Kingsley in which Newman’s “barristerial ability” is treated as an accusation rather than a compliment (353).

23 As Linda Peterson notes in Victorian Autobiography, Newman’s stress on textual interpretation is also authorized by the general tradition of spiritual autobiography as the Victorians knew it (14-17).

24 On this point in general, see Steven Helmling’s insightful observation that Newman endorsed spirit and interpretation precisely as antitheses to materialism and phenomena (141). On self-interpretation, see for
example, Newman’s defense of Tract 90: “I am surprised that men do not apply to the interpreters of Scripture generally the hard names which they apply to the author of Tract 90. He held a large system of theology, and applied it to the Articles: Episcopalians, or Lutherans, or Presbyterians, or Unitarians, hold a large system of theology and apply it to Scripture” (Apologia 77). Newman further explains that to understand Scripture—or, by extension any text—one must interpret it according to a theoretical frame, and every theoretical frame will fit the text well in some ways and no so well in others; in short, scripture does not self-interpret (Apologia 77-78). On objectivity, see for example his contrast between “Anglican theology,” which sees “the truth” as “objective and detached” and Catholic theology, which sees the truth as inextricably entangled with institution that relates it (Apologia 95).

25 The reviewers overwhelmingly concurred with Newman’s judgment that he had intellectually defeated Kingsley before the Apologia, as a narrative, even began (cf. Svalglic 376-77).

26 Durand realizes that religious novels with historical settings existed before Fabiola; what makes the work in many ways the beginning of a new genre is a careful attention to historical and archeological detail unparalleled in earlier religious fiction. At any rate, Fabiola’s popularity and critical reception certainly dwarfed those of Newman’s own early church novel, Callista; as Michel Durand, Fabiola’s principal critic, observes, “L’acceuil réservé à cet ouvrage de Newman paraît aussi presque froid lorsqu’un le compare à l’enthousiasme soulevé par Fabiola” (“Les Martyrs” 82).

27 As early as 1840, Francis Newman was insisting to John Henry that “Wiseman’s claim” to represent “Apostolic Christian[ity]” was “just as good, if not better” than his own (Petersburs 56).

28 Cf. Wiseman’s insistence that classical Greek and Roman thought, for all its brilliance, never arrived at the fullness of religious truth because of the near-impossibility of determining what method or use in such an inquiry and what postulates to assume (“On The Character of Faith” 285-86).

29 See also Manning’s principled but somewhat unrealistic assertion that “there is not a doctrine of faith on which Catholics in all the world differ by a shade” (136).

30 While some writers on Wiseman have found an anticipation of Newman’s idea of the development of doctrine in his early essays, I find Wiseman’s passing comments on the subject too brief and too dependent on the language of logical deduction to be definitive. In any case, Wiseman’s best known work, Fabiola, clearly teaches that the relationship between the current church and the early church is one of identity rather than development. Near the end of the novel, the narrator claims “to have shown, how not only doctrines and great sacred rites, but how even ceremonies and accessories were the same in the first three [Christian] centuries as now [in the Catholic Church]” (Wiseman Fabiola 286).

31 For Wiseman’s explicit endorsement and loose definition of Ultramontanism, see his Recollections of the Last Four Popes, pg. 24.

32 See also how in the novel of the same name Fabiola learns, to her surprise as a pagan philosopher, that Christian moral teaching involves placing a “restraint upon her studies” and that there can be harm in some kinds of knowledge and thought (76-77). She learns what her philosophy has previously never suspected, that some censorship is necessary and the value of intellectual freedom has limits (Wiseman Fabiola 77).

33 Wiseman’s opinion was a common one among Ultramontanes. See, for example, John Ciani’s summary of the thought of Cardinal Mazzella who held that because God is one, unity is perfection: “Truth, as an attribute of the One God, is one, and error ‘multiplex’” (109).

34 As Holmes observes, Newman’s theology was as controversial for its historical (rather than strictly deductive) method of reasoning as for its overly qualified endorsement of the Magisterium (“Newman’s” 17). Newman in the Apologia also recognizes and grants the contrast between the “logical method of the Roman schools” and his own theology, which, at least when compared to straight deduction, is more “of a tentative and empirical character” (63).

35 Manning’s work was not written until 1869, and so should not be taken as a key to understanding the Apologia. However, it can be considered as important for understanding Newman’s Journal, 1859-79, the other autobiographical work I am analyzing.

36 As was the case with Manning’s work, Newman’s Letter to the Duke of Norfolk (1874) is written too late to be relevant to the Apologia, but was completed before the end of The Journal 1859-79.

37 Since most of the attacks on Newman as a disloyal Catholic were contained only in publications by Catholics for Catholics, and since for various reasons—principally, fear of the libel laws, desire to preserve the appearance of unity, and gratitude, on W. G. Ward’s part, for Newman’s kindness to him at Oxford—
references to Newman in these publications were considerably veiled, the image of Newman as a docile, party-line Catholic living in intellectual slavery was not obliterated by but existed alongside the image of Newman as a disloyal sophist. The complexity of Newman’s position with regard to ecclesiastical politics also contributed to his contradictory reputation. Because of his insistence in The Idea of a University on the right to theorize, Newman tended to be aligned with Liberal Catholics like Lord Acton against the Ultramontanes (Altholz 198). On the other hand, Newman’s disdain for the empiricist epistemology on which the Liberal Catholic intellectuals often predicated their independence alienated Newman to some extent from the Liberals Catholics as well and occasionally helped inspire rumors that he had succumbed to Ultramontanism. Wiseman contributed to both the image of Newman as disloyal sophist and Newman as intellectual slave. By the time of the Apologia, Wiseman was privately using his ecclesiastical authority against Newman’s religious endeavors and ideas, and even complaining to Rome of his “insolence”; however, at the same time Wiseman was publicly insisting in his published writings that he intellectually ruled over a docile Newman (qtd. in Dessain and Kelly 286).

Although Harris was a practicing Catholic, her work is a sustained attack on the Catholic Church and a sustained apologetic for Tractarianism. In intellectual terms, it makes more sense to discuss her as an Anglican than as a Catholic.

On June 23, 1853, Newman recommended in a letter that Catherine Anne Bathurst read “the Cardinal’s article in the Dublin in 1841 on the Donatists, which, I suppose, is re-printed in his ‘Essays.’” (388). Newman’s comment leaves it unclear whether he had already read Essays on Various Subjects and was refraining from interrupting his letter-writing to double-check the work’s contents, whether he had not yet read the work and intended to read it later, or whether he had no intention of reading the work at all. At the very least, the comment shows Newman to have been aware of and interested in the work’s publication, to the point of recommending it to others.

Newman is, if anything, more explicit about the logical grounds for his lack of a right to teach in the “Advertisement” to Sermons Preached on Various Occasions. He writes of himself that “it seemed to him incongruous that one, who had so freely taught and published error in a Protestant communion, should put himself forward as a dogmatic teacher in the Catholic Church” (Newman “Advertisement” v).

While Wiseman is both an important rival to Newman and (in Landow’s terms), an important wisdom teacher, his Ultramontanism makes it impossible to properly consider him a rival sage. In brief aside in his rambling memoirs of “The Last Four Popes,” Wiseman suggests that the Popes have “the gift of prophecy” for the tenure of their office and that he has personally found their statements to be “words of mastery and spell over after events” (Recollections 364, 513, 16, 22, cf. 530). While Wiseman quite ably defends these teachings against their opponents, he professes no such inspiration himself, and largely assigns to himself the role of spokesman for the Pope’s positions.

The specific reference for this comment is a report that Wiseman has asserted that Newman’s lack of influence in the Catholic body is due largely to his residence in Birmingham. Wiseman claims that he requested that Newman move to London, where he could work more effectively, but Newman refused, a story Newman indignantly denies (Newman “To Emily Bowles” 137-38). Given that in moving him to Birmingham, Wiseman helped Newman break his staff, Wiseman now seems to be insisting that, on the contrary, Newman broke his own staff without outside aid. The more important element of the letter for my purposes is that Newman considers Wiseman to be publicizing Newman’s apparently inalterable lack of authority and influence.

Wiseman and Newman have been discussed together by literary critics only in terms of their novels Fabiola and Callista, which have been analyzed in collective opposition to Kingsley’s Hypatia rather than in contrast with each other (cf., for example, Lankewish 247). Even in the field of church history, serious study of the Ultramontanes as an intellectual movement has been conducted only within the last ten years, primarily in the groundbreaking essay collections Varieties of Ultramontanism and By Whose Authority?:

See Fothergill 222-23, in which a letter of Robert Browning’s is quoted to this effect.

The text of Wiseman’s essay fragment, entitled “Some remarks upon a passage in Dr. Newman’s Apologia,” is as follows:

There is a short paragraph in this invaluable work, which appears to me worthy of some elucidation. It occurs at p. 368, and runs as follows. “Soon” (after Dr. Newman’s leaving Littlemore, 1846) “Dr. Wiseman in whose Vicariate Oxford lay called me to
Oscott, and I went there with others; afterwards he sent me to Rome, and finally placed me in Birmingham.”

It is possible that some readers may see in these few lines, even now, a record of three arbitrary sets of episcopal authority, almost simultaneous, or without long intervals, and wholly unconnected with the writer’s desires or voluntary concurrence. But it may not be till all the parties interested in this abridged statement have passed away, and no one remains to explain it, that it may be seized on as an evidence of the summary way in which the Church deprives even men of Dr. Newman’s genius of any liberty. (qtd. in full in Schieffen 332-33)

In this fragment, Wiseman uses the device generally employed for the sake of decorum when Victorian Catholic writers attack each other in print: concern about how Protestants might misconstrue a passage. As the Letter to Pusey indicates, Newman attacked Manning in this manner, and Manning had previously attacked him in the same wise (9-11, 22-23). Wiseman here worries that the Apologia portrays him as an “arbitrary tyrant,” a reasonable concern, as Newman had long considered Wiseman to be such. Wiseman’s reaction to the Apologia differs from my reading only in that he fails to make the distinction between tyranny over Newman’s body and tyranny over Newman’s mind and soul that I consider vital in understanding the passage at hand.

46 All subsequent references to Wiseman’s article further evidence the pattern I have sketched. Most notably, these references to the article fail to mention its author; we learn that “the Article in the Dublin Review” had affected many at Oxford and that “the important article in the Dublin” had disturbed those close to Newman, but the author’s identity is carefully omitted, and, in any case, we are reminded that Newman considered the article to be guilty of “great speciousness” in “argument” (Apologia 107).
47 See, for example, Michael Ryan’s 1979 comment concerning the Apologia that “Bad writing, for Newman, is techne, the artificial arrangement of words, and one version of it is logic, the technical apparatus for reasoning by external propositions” (138).
48 Later in the Apologia, Newman again suggests that abstraction was responsible for the errors of the younger members of the Oxford movement, and again contrasts his intellectual methods to their. He writes that he created and promoted the Lives of English Saints series to turn “the minds of men who were in danger of running wild . . . from doctrine to history, and from speculation to fact” (Newman Apologia 164).
49 Much earlier in the narrative, Newman attributes some offensive behavior of his own to falsely relying overmuch on abstract logic in concrete matters. He writes that during the Oxford movement. “I would have no dealings with my brother, and I put my conduct on a syllogism. I said, ‘St. Paul bids us avoid those who cause divisions; you cause divisions; therefore I must avoid you’” (Newman Apologia 50).
CHAPTER 4

“SOME LINGERING VESTIGE OF MY LOVER-SHADOW”:
H. G. WELLS AND THE TRAUMA OF TEXTUAL RECEPTION

I: The Science of Prophecy: The Invention and Rejection of a Middle-Class Sage

H. G. Wells begins his Experiment in Autobiography (1934) in despair. He writes:

I need freedom of mind. I want peace for work . . . . My thoughts and work are encumbered by claims and vexations and I cannot see any hope of release from them; any hope of a period of serene and beneficent activity, before I am overtaken altogether by infirmity and death. (1)

By the time of the Experiment in Autobiography, Wells has had a long and storied career. He has been one of the founders of the genre of science fiction and one of the most beloved novelists of Edwardian England; even in his controversial post-war phase as a writer of nonfiction prophecies of the future, he has written one the best-selling books of his era, the Outline of History. For over three decades, Wells has functioned as scientific sage and prophet of the future and, if his work received better reviews before the war, some of his most successful books have been written since it. He has taken on himself the mantle of Carlyle (cf. Wells Experiment 427), and has recast the sage discourse as the art of predicting the future rather than the art of interpreting the present. He has, moreover, done quite well at it. Most famously, Wells has accurately predicted the World War I powers, the development of the tank and air warfare, America’s rise as
the world’s dominant economic and political power, and the rise of what we now call the
global village.¹

So why, then, is Wells, the most influential sage of his epoch and a very rich man
to boot, in despair, and why does despair cause him to turn to autobiography? At first,
Wells seems to blame his despair on the irritations of everyday life, the interruptions,
business affairs, and phone calls that prevent him from working as effectively as he
would like. As he proceeds, though, the problems turn less material. He lacks “an
assurance that what” he has “produced when he has done [his] best upon it, would be
properly significant and effective” (Wells Experiment 5). Despite his vast success, he
does not feel that his work has been effective. Wells hates the current world, finding it to
be a meaningless, miserable waste, devoid of essence or purpose. He has tried to lay out
a plan for the entire future of humanity, a way that “human life as we know it” can be
used as the “raw material for human life as it might be” (Wells Experiment 11). Later in
the Experiment, Wells calls this concept “The Idea of a Planned World,” and from his
other works, the reader can fill in the outline of this plan. Wells desires a politically,
religiously, and ideologically unified World State, and believes that humanity will
inevitably “perish” due to the vast destructiveness of modern war if the World State is not
achieved (Experiment 12). Since he has been “among the first” to come up with the
World State concept, in describing the World State he has been writing “the broad lines
and conditions of the human outlook,” even “a guiding framework for life”; he has been
authoring what he literally believes to be the future of humanity, and has been attempting
to induce others to create the future he has imagined (Wells Experiment 11, 12). But the
World State has not come. Wells is in despair because the demands he places on his
audience are so large that no reader reception can live up to them; he wants nothing less than humanity to reshape the world according to his imagination. Only then, can he see the meaninglessness and chaos of the present replaced with a meaningful, planned world. And, since Wells does not believe that the universe possesses any inherent essence, reason, or order, he sees no inherent reason that humanity must do as he says. Wells feels that, thus far, both the intellectual specialists, whom he needs to help him administer the World State, and the mass readers, whom he needs to consent to be administered, have let him down and thwarted his plans. The intellectuals “disregard” his “effort” and refuse to “adopt” his “results” (Wells Experiment 11). The rest of “mankind” has also not yet “pull[ed] itself together” and followed his plans (Wells Experiment 11-12).

Wells writes his autobiography to assure himself that his life has not been in vain. As he writes, “The story will begin in perplexity and go on to a troubled and unsystematic awakening. It will culminate in the attainment of a clear sense of purpose, conviction that the great coming world of order is real and sure; but, so far as my own life goes, with time running out and a thousand entanglements delaying realization” (Wells Experiment 13). To overcome these “entanglements” and use his life as evidence of his theories, he will also have to confront literary and intellectual controversies he has lost or avoided and that remain in public knowledge as evidence that his life does not prove his theories. Particularly, he will have to address and narrate his controversies with Henry James and G. K. Chesterton. James, the consummate literary specialist, refused to adopt Wells’s conclusions about the nature of the novel, and dismissed his novels as unworthy of the standards of literature as a professionalized, self-defined field; James’s arguments are still being repeated in 1934, and have galvanized the literary community, whom
Wells wishes to be propagandists for the World State, against Wells. Chesterton, the Edwardian period’s most ardent populist, mocked Wells in a number of widely repeated quips for not understanding the nature of humanity, and authored a Catholic history of the world designed to serve as an alternative to Wells’s *Outline of History*. For Wells, Chesterton, a widely read, traditionalist populist, represents the possibility that the masses will reject his work. To consolidate his literary authority, Wells will have to narrate both of these traumatic literary controversies, and he will attempt to do so by first, in the *Experiment in Autobiography*, contextualizing them in the grand scope of his Outline of both his own history and human history, and then, in *H. G. Wells in Love*, attempting to triumph over his rivals by remaking them as an ideal, infinitely submissive audience, which he calls the Lover-Shadow.

Since the precise nature of each sage’s trauma is dependent on the particulars of his philosophical system, if I am to explain why and in what manner Wells resorts to autobiographical narration to overcome his intellectual traumas, I must first sketch the outline of Wells’s thought and the intellectual environment in which this thought came to be. As an Edwardian sage, Wells writes in a very different intellectual milieu than that of Carlyle and Newman, an intellectual milieu in many ways more hostile to the sages’ attempts to provide the universe with a coherent, overarching meaning (cf. Helmling 117). Newman and, late in life, Carlyle both fought to resist the Darwinian model of development because of its implicit nihilism, its implicit suggestion that there is no purpose or meaning in the universe, that all life is simply a process of undirected flux and change, devoid of teleology. By the Edwardian epoch, except for Shaw’s bizarre attempt to revive Lamarkian evolution, this battle has largely been lost. For most intellectuals,
Darwin is not a subject of debate, but a given. The Edwardians also inherit a universe that is literally less stable than the Victorian universe. The discovery of radio waves (1888), x-rays (1895), and radioactivity (1896) have discredited the common scientific premise that the atom is indivisible, and suggest, instead that all matter is fundamentally insolid (Rose 6-7). More philosophical forms of nihilism have also come into vogue. As Linda Dowling notes, by the turn of the century, many prominent writers, influenced by the neo-grammarian linguists, consider language to be disconnected from reality, to be “independent of logic and indeed of thought itself”; by this logic, any attempt to ascribe a meaning to the universe is merely an arbitrary (and irrational) linguistic construction (173). Nietzsche is the subject of an Edwardian cult (cf. Ellman 97), and his insistence on both the constructed nature of meaning and the will to power influences many Edwardian thinkers. Of particular concern to the autobiographer, by the turn of the century psychological theories of the subconscious have come into vogue, a development that seriously undermines the idea of a stable, unified self (Ellman 56). When Edwardian sages attempt to restore a holistic meaning to both the self and the universe, they do so in the face of each of the principal philosophical and scientific ideas that would later lead to the fragmented universe of modernism.²

By the Edwardian epoch, the sages have also lost an important battle about the nature of knowledge itself. Carlyle in his Edinburgh address and Newman in his Idea of a University sought to stem the rising tide of intellectual specialism, the increasing sense that generalizations about the nature of reality were meaningless and that intellectual credibility could be ascribed only to the proclamation of an expert about his or her particular field. While Newman’s work would continue to be influential in liberal arts
universities and in the Great Books movement, by the Edwardian epoch British society as a whole was becoming increasingly professionalized. In his magisterial study *The Rise of Professional Society*, Harold Perkin charts both the professionals’ displacement of the capitalists as the preeminent possessors of social capital and the epistemological implications of this development. As concern grew in late nineteenth-century England over the political and economic health of the Empire and doubt grew as to the ability of the aristocracy to administer it, the “efficiency men,” experts who claimed that their specialized training would enable them to reduce imperial “waste” and restore imperial “health,” came increasingly into intellectual and political prominence (Rose 117-19). The rise of the efficiency men rapidly accelerated England’s transformation from an industrial society to a professional society, a process which the universities, under the influence of the German model of education, had already begun.

The rise of the professional class, as Perkin explains, inadvertently institutionalizes British society’s loss of metaphysical meaning. Perkin argues that since professional expertise in most cases creates no material capital, professionals cannot allow the market to determine the value of their skills. Professionals instead demand that their skills be taken at “their [own] valuation” (Perkin 16). The proliferation of self-validating professional fields then results in the division of knowledge into mutually suspicious and carefully “segregat[ed]” intellectual disciplines, making a coherent, unified account of the world impossible (Perkin 395-98). Since the sage’s primary function is to provide reality with a unified meaning, a world that possesses no general meaning (the view of the Edwardian specialists) and a world that possesses no meaning of any sort (the view of the Edwardian literati) are equally hostile to the sage project.

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Each of the Edwardian sages uses an intricate series of strategies to fight this epistemological collapse on both fronts and show that meaning can exist in or after an age of skeptics and specialists.

Wells’s appeal as a sage is tied in part to how much he is a man of his age, how nearly he is a nihilist and how nearly a specialist. His first two book-length publications are, in fact, a nihilistic novel that imagines the extinction of life on earth (The Time Machine) and a biology textbook. Wells rejects the sage discourse’s central tenets—the fundamental interpretability of the world, the epistemological primacy of the individual observer, even the very existence of the self—but tenaciously holds to the discourse’s primary goal, the creation of a totalistic system that gives the self and universe a coherent meaning. This fundamental paradox at the heart of Wells’s sage work is the basis for its public appeal in an age of transition and for the many intellectual attacks on it. Much of Carlyle’s rhetorical force comes from his continual insistence that the very condition of finding a new saving faith is the acceptance of much of modern skepticism and the abandonment of the old faiths that, apparently, did not save. In Wells, this rhetorical combination is pushed towards the breaking point, as meaning itself has become an old faith that must be transcended if we are to make the universe mean. The idea could not be pushed much further.

A deep skepticism lies behind Wells’s sage work; unlike his predecessors, he is the master interpreter not of the present world that does exist, but of a future world that might exist. In a move that would seem to abolish the very possibility of the sage project, he concedes that the universe is devoid of meaning. The world, he observes almost as frequently as his modernist opponents, is and has always been a meaningless
maze, a morass that defies interpretation. As early as *Anticipations*, Wells deems “life” to be “most wonderfully arbitrary” (151). The narrator of Wells’s *Tono-Bungay* concurs, viewing the universe as both meaningless and deeply unstable. He considers life to be an “accident[al]” “by-play of matter,” the world to be without “definite purpose,” and the universe to be a “silly and wild” mess (Wells *Tono-Bungay* 315, 268, 62, 113).

Influenced by early studies of radioactivity, he knows that even the seeming solidity of matter is an illusion—we live in a “dry-rotting” world doomed to “dispersal,” in a universe as unstable as “soapsuds” (*Tono-Bungay* 268, 166). Even in the final pages of his posthumous autobiography, Wells rants against this “lie of a world” and proclaims his hatred and distrust of life as it exists (Wells *H. G Wells* 229). Since Wells is a consistent materialist, humankind poses no exception to the grim world he posits. Humanity is a species in “chaos” fumbling its way through a universe that is “cold, lifeless, and void” (*Outline* vii, 4). Samuel Beckett could hardly have put it more bleakly.

In a paradox common to the Edwardian sage, Wells bases his proposed restoration of meaning precisely on his nihilistic realizations; like each of the Edwardian sages, he restores the possibility of meaning by turning one of the central tenets of Edwardian nihilism against the others. A student of T. H. Huxley at the Normal School of Science, Wells bases his sage system primarily around Darwinian biology (Wagar 62-63). What Wells gains from Darwin—and also from his favorite Greek philosopher, Heraclitus—is primarily the concept that the world is in a state of constant flux and is devoid of teleology (Wagar 71-72). Wells scorns the popular Victorian misconception of evolution as a continual process of improvement that leads inevitably to humanity and, often, to the British Empire; evolution, as Wells understands it, primarily means that life
possesses no stable shape and moves towards no coherent goal (cf. *Tono-Bungay* 70 ff.).

From his study of Darwinian thought and its rejection of the idea of fixed types, Wells also gains a life-long philosophical nominalism (cf. Wells *Belloc Objects* 55, *Bulpington* 46-47, *Wagar* 102-3). He rejects the validity of abstract logic, for reason itself is a meaningless development of a purposeless evolution (cf. Stover 129, Wells ’42 196). As he writes in an early essay, man's “reasoning powers are about as much a truth-seeking tool as the snout of a pig”; both are adaptations that have enabled survival, not keys to understanding the nature of the universe (qtd. in Scafella 182). George Orwell considered Wells to be the most influential thinker of the Edwardian epoch, and much of Wells’s appeal for young intellectuals in the pre-war period came from his radical skepticism (Orwell 143, cf. *Wagar* 18). He loathed the aristocracy, capitalism, organized religion, and conventional morality, and many found his message that these were all arbitrary, unnecessary developments liberating.

Wells found his vocation as a sage by carrying his nihilistic vision of evolution to its logical conclusion. If both humanity and the universe are inherently devoid of meaning and constitutionally unstable, then they are infinitely pliable. Wells pictures the post-Darwinian, post-atomic universe as Plato pictured prime matter, as a substance without form, susceptible, due to its very formlessness, to infinite reshaping. By the evolutionary accident of the development of a self-conscious, self-reflective mind, humanity has become the first species capable of deliberate self-shaping, of replacing natural selection with “self-selection” and imposing order on the disordered forces of evolution.8 As Wells says in his *Experiment in Autobiography*, “Human life, as we know it, is only the dispersed raw material for human life as it might be” (11). If humanity acts
in a concerted fashion, it can, through education and eugenics, impose order, form, and meaning on human life, and then, through technology, impose human meaning on the world (cf. Wells *Outline* vol. 1 377, *Open Conspiracy* vii, 35-36; Carey 124-27).9

William Scheick’s summation of Wells’s vision of the human mind—a “formless” entity “which nonetheless possess a potentiality for form”—also, uncoincidentally, aptly summarizes his vision of the universe (*Splintering* 56). In short, the world, lacking an essence, lacks the means to resist Wells’s attempts to make it cohere. The world, which has never possessed a meaning, could have one in the future, since humanity is a “Prometheus” capable of freeing itself from the blind forces of natural selection (Wagar 78). Wells dubs those who, through social engineering, work to give shape to humanity and the world “the Open Conspiracy.” The distance between the Edwardian sage project and the Victorian sage project is succinctly expressed in the replacement of Carlyle’s Open Secret, the inherent meaning of the universe that can be read by the discerning eye, with Wells’s Open Conspiracy, the ascribed meaning for the universe that can be imposed by the conspiring mind.

As Harold Perkin notes, Wells did much to popularize the Edwardian emphasis on the cult of the specialist, and his Utopias are invariably oligarchical regimes run by highly skilled specialists (130-32,159, 169). Wells generally imagines his World State arising following some global crisis. A global crisis, usually a massive war, both destabilizes existing regimes and existing belief systems—which, as they were mere historical accidents reflecting no essential reality, were never that stable anyway—and causes humanity to reach the threshold of its pain tolerance and become unable to continue to bear its own brutality, meaninglessness, and discord (cf. Carey 133).
Democratic governments prove to be, of their very nature, unable to respond to this crisis; Wells’s study of evolution had convinced him that a species always develops through the actions of a select minority and that the majority of any species is incapable of effectively facing changed circumstances (cf. Wells Open Conspiracy 59-61, Wagar 69-70, 165). At the moment of crisis, a set of technocrats whose name varies (the Samurai in A Modern Utopia, the Open Conspiracy in The Open Conspiracy, Wings Over the World in Things to Come) arises and, with great technological finesse, plans out the destiny of humanity; humanity, desperate for any relief from misery, complies (cf. Ross 74).10 A constructed but real human coherence and unity follows, resulting in happiness. In the World State a humanity “at peace with itself” directs its attention towards conquering and reshaping nature; a world still fundamentally without form and void is replaced by, to use a favorite phrase of Wells’s, “a planned world” (Wells Anticipations 267). These technocrats, as should be apparent, replicate Wells’s literary endeavors; they make a new world. As William Scheick insightfully observes, Wells’s belief that his books, committees, and gatherings of experts could, if expressive of the Collective Will, bring a new world into being identifies him as an heir to such Utopian romantics as Percy Shelley, albeit a bizarrely belated and scientistic one (Splintering 116, 118).

According to Robert Trotter, a desire to “pu[t] meaning and value in place of the world” both inspires the modernist hatred of mimesis and marks early twentieth century clinical definitions of paranoia, making literary modernism “paranoid modernism” (5, emphasis Trotter’s). Wells here differs from modernism only in that he contrasts the chaos of the world-that-is not with the order that can found in artistic creation but with the order that will be found in the future world. He relies on the apocalyptic rather than
the aesthetic to temper his nihilism. In a 1921 interview, Wells succinctly ties together his superficially disparate nihilism, futurism, and totalism, as he laments, “I must needs go about this present world of disorder and darkness doing such feeble things as I can towards the world of my desire” (Geoffrey West 214-15). Wells, like William Blake, often professed admiration for the Gnostics, and here he sounds like a Gnostic Christ, preaching in King James English an alternate universe to a lost generation bound to an illusory world.11

In the years before World War I, the World State was a vision Wells entertained and a goal for which he worked, but Wells was notoriously fickle in the pursuit of his goals and this too was a goal he did not systematically pursue. In the Edwardian epoch, Wells was content to depict his vision of the radical uncertainty of human life in an alternating series of Utopias and anti-Utopias (cf. Carey 145-47). Like the Old Testament prophets, Wells uttered prophecies contingent on human action, not absolute predictions, and, depending on how humanity chose to act, he found the extinction of life on earth (as in The Time Machine) or the earthly paradise (as in A Modern Utopia) to be equally possible (cf. Wells Open Conspiracy 198-99, Belloc Objects 87). Pessimistic readers could enjoy Wells’s more despairing novels like The War in the Air and Tono-Bungay and social reformers could enjoy his Utopian works like Mankind in the Making and Anticipations. The extreme violence of World War I jarred Wells out of this ambivalence. After an initial patriotic phase (in which he coined the oft-quoted slogan “The War to End War”), Wells became convinced that the war evidenced the terrifying capacity of humanity for self-induced extinction. From 1916, he considered a one-world government, a “World State” as he invariably called it, to be not just a tantalizing vision
of a possible world of purpose and meaning—one possible outcome among others, albeit
the most desirable outcome—but a necessity if the species were to survive (cf. Wagar 20,
Wells Open Conspiracy ix, 128). World War I intensified his need to create a
meaningful world. He had always thought that “whatever was chaotic or accidental about
the external world” could be eliminated; now, its elimination came as a pressing necessity
(Wagar 79). The Great War also seemed to be precisely the destabilizing force needed to
overthrow the old order, the evolutionary jolt that revealed the fundamental instability of
the current order and the possibility for change and reconstruction (cf. Wagar 34, Wells
Open Conspiracy 187-89, cf. Experiment 198). In the final years of the war, Wells
worked to organize the League of Nations as a potential forerunner to a World State (cf.
Wagar 36-36). The war years were, Wells wrote, “a time of incalculable plasticity” (qtd.
Wagar 34), a period of flux that mirrored his vision of a fundamentally formless universe,
and upon which he hoped to impose his own order.

When the League of Nations came, in his judgment, to be controlled by
nationalist forces, Wells renounced it to pursue the World State through less indirect
means. Like Ruskin with his Guild of St. George or Chesterton with his Distributist
League, he attempted to bring about his ideal through his own direct action. In 1928, he
wrote The Open Conspiracy—which he dubbed his attempt at a “religion,” his attempt to
give the chaos of the age “general form and direction”—in an effort to inaugurate this
conspiracy himself (vii). He called for scientists, writers, and other intellectuals to
renounce their nationalist allegiances and attempt to work for a one-world government
run by themselves and erected on a Wellsian basis (cf. Open Conspiracy 30-31, 132).
Without the consent of the intellectuals, governments could not have wars; they would be
unable to design weaponry, conduct effective military campaigns, or propagandize persuasively (cf. Wells Open Conspiracy 79-80, 187-88, Things to Come). Therefore, if the intellectuals as a group chose to impose a world order, governments would have no means of resistance. The Open Conspiracy was to develop in stages. The work of propagating the idea of a single world order would come first, and would be necessarily dependent on literary men who would serve as propagandists, then, the work of planning the world in earnest would begin, which would be necessarily dependent on scientists who would serve as social engineers on a grand scale (cf. Wells Open Conspiracy 126, Wagar 97). Both scientist and literary man, Wells sought to begin the works of planning and propaganda himself (cf. Open Conspiracy 127, 131). As the originator of the Open Conspiracy and the author of various works of prophecy, Wells attempted, literally, to write the future. As he admits, his Open Conspiracy is nothing short of “a world religion . . . definitely and obviously attempting to swallow up the entire population of the world and become the new human community” (Wells Open Conspiracy 163).

Wells’s two best reviewed and best-selling books of the post-war era, the Outline of History and the Experiment in Autobiography, are attempts to illustrate the plausibility and necessity of a World State by means, respectively, of world history and Wells’s own life. Wells’s Outline of History, the best-selling historical book of its epoch, was intended to be the opening section of a “modern Bible” that would serve as the “mental basis of the Open Conspiracy” (Wells Open Conspiracy 128, cf. Ross 13, 30-31, 42). In this work, he sought to replace the nationalistic myths of conventional history, which he held to be responsible for wars and national conflicts, with a globalist mythos, which
would teach the nations of the world to live as one (cf. Wells Experiment 612, Outline vol. I ix). He relates “the history of life as a progress from fragmentation towards world unity, mental and material” (Wells Open Conspiracy 129). Strangely unbound to history, *The Outline of History* proceeds for one hundred eighty-three pages before reaching the beginning of recorded history and continues for twenty-five pages after reaching its end.

In something of an exaggerated version of the narrative of progress itself, in *The Outline of History* the horrors of prehistory and the perfections of the future allow the ambiguities and miseries of the present to form merely the dramatic middle of a compelling plot (cf. Ross 53). In brief, Wells depicts prehistoric man as possessing a stable but meaningless identity. Early man is a slave to irrational forces, both material and social, from which he derives his identity and existence and against which he cannot meaningfully rebel. Early man has no capacity for abstract thought (his art is simply pictorial and his burial rites indicate only that he did not grasp the idea of death) and lives in thrall to an irrational, brutal father figure Wells calls “The Old Man” (*Outline*, vol. 1 98-100, 123-24, 80).

Early man bases his identity and his picture of the universe around these submissions, worshipping as tribal divinities the very forces that confine him, nature and (deceased) Old Men (*Outline*, vol. 1 125, 131). This submission-derived identity comprises the “old human nature” or the “Normal Social Life” under which Wells suspects the rural masses still live and against which he is continually railing (*Outline*, vol. 2 403, “Past” 7).

Recorded history is for Wells the chaotic story of humanity’s sporadic attempts—or, at least, the intellectual elite’s attempts—to throw off the Normal Social Life and move into a systematic, directed, carefully designed human life and human identity (cf. 230
Wells *Outline* vol. 1 361-62, Ross 55). Recorded history, in which human beings do not possess stable meaning, in which they are neither clearly slave nor clearly free, then becomes, essentially, Carlyle’s French Revolution, the necessary period of chaos that follows the overthrow of a stable lie and that precedes the development of a stable truth. Although humanity’s attempts to throw off the Normal Social life have thus far resulted only in fragmentation and division (for they have not been globally coordinated and none have been globally successful), since modern communications allow for global coordination of ideas and modern war shows the necessity for global unity, in the future these problems will be overcome and the new order of the World State ushered in (cf. Ross 65). As Wells writes, “Our *Outline of History* has been ill written if it has failed to convey our conviction of the character of the state towards which the world is moving” (*Outline*, vol. 2 586).

As Wells’s view of history of the self is exactly parallel to his view of the history of the world, it is not surprising that his *Experiment in Autobiography* possesses a basic structural similarity to his *Outline of History*. Wells explains his theory of the self most carefully in his University of London doctoral dissertation (1944), though he reached his basic conclusions considerably earlier. A coherent self, Wells believes, does not naturally exist; a united and coherent self must be artificially forged and created through the act of narration just as a united and coherent world must be artificially forged and created through the Open Conspiracy. Just as primitive humanity has a stable but meaningless identity, the lower species have no sense of self. The higher species that follow in evolutionary succession possess a sense of an individual self, but this self exists only as “a biologically convenient delusion” (Wells ’42 169). The “self” is simply
whichever among many “loosely linked behavior systems” happens to be dominant at the moment (Wells ’42 169-170). To make social interaction possible, humanity, however, cannot simply reconcile itself to possessing many possible selves; human beings must “sustain a persona”—an “idea of what [they] wan[t] to do and how [they] wan[t] other people to take them” that constitutes in practice a “wobbling working self”—if they are to interact with each other without chaos (Wells ’42 172, Experiment 9). Whatever behavior systems or actions do not fit the persona get “push[ed] away into the unconscious,” producing, as befits the current and historical state in a Wellsian system, an uneasily divided self (Wells ’42 172).14 Wells puts the point more plainly in the Experiment in Autobiography: “For the normal man, as we have him to-day, his personal unity is a delusion” (349). As one would expect given the general outline of Wellsian thought I have presented, his dissertation later suggests that a persona that approximates reality, while biologically unnecessary, may be possible. As the man of science's knowledge base expands, Wells suggests, so will his persona, until, finally, this persona accurately approximates his actions and meaningfully reflects his relation to the world. Wells is vague about exactly how this process would work, but is vigorously affirmative as to its result: the man of science's future “enhancement of . . . personas” will constitute “an enduring contribution to the synthesis of mankind” (‘42 193). Wells suggests in his Experiment in Autobiography that he is very close to creating such a coherent persona himself (cf. 349). In short, like meaning itself, the self has never truly existed, but could be artificially forged and made real.

Wells’s Experiment in Autobiography quite explicitly relates his life as an illustration of his theories, as evidence of both humanity’s development towards a World
State and his own ability to construct a relatively coherent persona. Wells, like George
Ponderevo of *Tono-Bungay*, is born in a very provincial England has changed little since
the Restoration. The aristocracy rule it, and Christianity is unquestioned; it is the
submission-oriented, God-fearing world of the Normal Social Life (cf. Wells *Experiment*
28-35). Wells from the first is a Prometheus at war with this world, getting into trouble
with the aristocracy and mocking religion (cf. Wells *Experiment* 45-46, 140). He is
liberated from this world by his discovery of science. He is given the chance to attend a
local school whose curriculum consists of little more than cramming, but he crams with
unusual proficiency, and discovers that he has remarkable intellectual gifts, especially in
the field of biology (cf. Wells *Experiment* 113). His scientific ability allows him to enter
the Normal School of Science as a scholarship student and to study under his mentor, T.
H. Huxley, where he develops his understanding of evolution as the key to understanding
the universe (cf. Wells *Experiment* 139, 162). After college, he uses his scientific
training first to question the necessity of all established institutions and then, through his
“scientific” predictions of the future, to imagine a better existence for humanity (cf.
Wells *Experiment* 410, 425, 549-53). The Great War confirms the necessity of the World
State, and his identity as its prophet (cf. Wells *Experiment* 197-98, 520, 594); however,
as the World State has not yet come, both the meaning he finds in the world and the
meaning he finds in himself have yet to materialize. The autobiography is explicitly an
effort to suggest that Wells’s world and persona are in the process of being accepted by
his audience and that they will, therefore, be proven valid (cf. Wells *Experiment* 623-24,
705). Overall, the book shows Wells, like the age, throwing off, by means of scientific
thought, provincialism and tradition in favor of cosmopolitanism and progress, and establishes his credentials to proclaim the World State.

Like all sage autobiographies, Wells’s autobiographies seek to show that every aspect of his life can be explained in terms of his system. The generally optimistic arc of the *Experiment in Autobiography* contains some moments of intense despair, some humorous anecdotes, and some legitimate crises of authority, all of which are ultimately made to serve the work’s main purposes. It is with Wells’s crises of authority that I am most concerned. Wells’s authority is vulnerable to attack at a couple of key points due to the nature of his system. The skepticism of his philosophical system is part of its appeal for the twentieth-century reader, but it also makes his system one unusually prone to trauma. The other sages in this study posit a construction of authority that presumes the inevitable victory of their ideals—that Carlyle is a prophet and the elect will follow a true prophet, that Newman is a legitimate interpreter of God’s creation and gradually God’s truth will out, that Chesterton is a legitimate spokesman for the masses and the masses are always right—and suffer trauma when a problem in reception throws this philosophy into question. There is no such presumption of inevitability in Wells’s system. Since Wells considers both the universe and humanity to possess no essential nature, the validity of his ideas rests entirely on humanity’s willingness or unwillingness to accept them. Wells does not simply have a crisis of authority. Wells *is* a crisis of authority. His demands on the audience border on the incredible. He demands that humanity as a whole reshape its existence in accord with his ideals; else, unless humanity inversely proves him right by completely obliterating itself, he is a false prophet. As he realizes, if “sufficient men and women” are not willing to join the Open Conspiracy and propel it to victory,
than he is a deluded dreamer, and, as he admits, there is “no foretelling” whether a
sufficient number will be interested (Wells *Open Conspiracy* 198, cf. 27). Wells’s
occasional fantasies of human extinction reflect his intermittent loathing for a species that
might not listen to him (cf. *Open Conspiracy* 14).

While *any* rejection of Wells’s message constitutes a threat to his authority, there
are two basic ways that the Wellsian future, on its own terms, could fail to come to pass.
The first consists of a traison des clercs against Wells’s ideas, in the possibility that the
leaders he has designated to lead humanity into the future will not follow his plans. In his
novels and prophecies, the World State is invariably brought about by a highly
specialized elite who direct the affairs of humanity along Wellsian lines. If the
specialists, the professional classes of scientists, engineers, bureaucrats, and authors,
reject Wells’s ideas, his future, then, cannot materialize. If the intellectual classes
cannot unite under Wells’s leadership, the division and chaos of the present will continue
(cf. *Open Conspiracy* 171). The second possibility consists in a revolt of the masses, in
the possibility that the majority of humanity will not follow the leaders Wells has
designated for them. Wells deeply fears the possibility that the ignorant masses will rise
up and destroy learning and progress; as he complains, “the multitude, when it is suitably
roused, can upset anything, but I do not believe that it can create anything whatever” (qtd.
in Wagar 185). If the masses refuse to follow the elite and, instead, destroy them, then
the possibility of deliberate, scientific human self-shaping is also destroyed; humanity
will be as humanity has been, and the Wellsian future will not materialize (cf. Wells
*Open Conspiracy* 93). If the masses unite against the elite, humanity will lapse back
into the barbarism of its past.
Each of the two primary crises in Wells’s authority with which his autobiographies are concerned represent one of the possible ways in which his sage system could be falsified. As Wells worked to change the fundamental nature of the world, he wrote books that were increasingly thesis-driven and unconcerned with questions of literary form and style. Consequently, his literary style did not develop much past its Edwardian peak, and—with exceptions like the *Outline of History* and *Experiment in Autobiography*—became, by his own admission, much sloppier as the years went on. As Wells was becoming more and more enamored of his prophetic ideas, the literary world itself was becoming more and more concerned with the issues of specialization and professionalization that he had helped to raise for the society as a whole. Henry James, in particular, sought to define the distinctive nature of the novel as an art form and the aims of the novelist as a specialist in the novel. Since many popular Edwardian writers (including Wells himself) had compromised their artistic independence by writing propaganda for England during the Great War, the anti-war sentiment that swept the British literati in the waning years of the war and immediately thereafter also helped to encourage literary professionalism, by making it seem ethically necessary for literature to be an end in itself that answered to no outside standards (cf. Hynes *War* 226-29, 399-401, Sherry *Great War* 14, 59-61). Wells needed specialists of all varieties to join the Open Conspiracy if the World State was to come into being (cf. Ross 110)—the work of writers as a profession was especially needed to propagandize the new order—but, instead, he found himself increasingly defined as unprofessional by his own profession. The forces of specialization, which he had idealized, had turned on him. Wells’s trauma over this unexpected development can be traced to a particular
moment: 1914, when Wells, then at the top of his fame and literary respectability, found his writing assailed by Henry James, the dominant literary critic of his epoch; as James’s attack would be accepted as Gospel by the modernists, who would repeat its particulars for the rest of Wells’s life, this controversy would haunt him more with every passing year, and by 1934 and the *Experiment in Autobiography* it constituted a trauma indeed.

The other main crisis in Wells’s authority concerns the mass’s resistance to his ideas. As Wells aged, he increasingly saw the Catholic Church as embodying the basic beliefs of the masses. In the Catholic Church, the acceptance of authority, love of tradition, fear of change, hatred of eugenics, and distrust of intellectuals that he imagined (and hated) in the masses were institutionalized and theorized (cf. Wells *Open Conspiracy* 59-61). Essentially, Wells comes to accept Chesterton’s equation of Catholicism with the masses, but regards the masses as incorrigible rather than infallible. For Wells, “the Catholic vision of life” systematizes a “common-sense vision of the world” that is “widely accepted” outside of the church’s borders (*Belloc Objects* 82). In Catholic thinkers, the “resistances” of the generally “silent” masses to progress and the World State are given voice and “animation” (Wells “Fantasies” 150, 155).

Wells’s feelings about this subject were exasperated when the Catholic Church became the most important institution to throw its weight against the *Outline of History*. Catholic authors and Catholic bishops in both England and America launched assaults on the accuracy of Wells’s atheistic history, and the book was banned by Catholic schools. Wells’s friends advised him to ignore the Catholic response to his work as merely the voice of reactionaries with no meaningful connection to the majority of readers or intellectuals (Mackenzie 348). The Catholic attack on the *Outline* obsessed Wells,
however; in it, he thought he saw the mass’s resistance to the leadership of the intellectuals in general and to himself in particular articulated and exemplified. He became embroiled in a pamphlet-war with Hilaire Belloc over the *Outline of History*, and afterwards became ever more explicit about the idea that Catholicism would be outlawed in the World State (Wells ’42 57, 100-1). Like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and many other British writers of the first third of the twentieth century, Wells identifies G. K. Chesterton, more than any other author, as the voice of the masses. Wells considers him the chief intellectual advocate of “the Normal Social Life” and to be one of the only “clear-headed and consistent” “reactionaries” in the world (“Past” 9, 17); moreover, Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man* (1925) was the best-selling attempt to refute the *Outline of History* by means of a Catholic interpretation of history. A famous wit, Chesterton had mocked Wells’s Utopian works for venerating an imaginary humanity that does not exist and scorning actual humans who do exist. Chesterton loves ordinary, uneugenic, unhygenic, unplanned humanity, and considers Wells to be ignorant of “human psychology” and to have in his Utopias failed to “sufficiently allow for the stuff or material of men” (*Heretics* 38-39). Chesterton, after James, represents the most fundamental threat to Wells’s authority, as he embodies the potentially fatal resistance of the masses to his theories, the fatal possibility that humanity will insist on remaining as it is.

As James is the greater threat to Wells’s authority, and haunts his first autobiography as Chesterton haunts his second, I will begin my discussion of Wells’s attempts to narrate his intellectual traumas by discussing Henry James and his extended treatment in the *Experiment in Autobiography*. Prior to James’s assault on his work,
Wells was considered an increasingly important novelist and theorist of the novel. Wells put forth his theory of the novel in his 1911 talk “The Contemporary Novel” (published in book form in 1914). Here Wells claims that if the novel were to play its proper role as the “initiator of knowledge” in “that complicated system of adjustments and readjustments which is modern civilization,” it must have enough “freedom of form” and “rambling discursiveness” to interpret the whole of a complex and ever-changing world (“Contemporary Novel” 154, 131, 138). If the novel is to analyze and unite modern humanity, Wells concludes, the novel must be “kept free from the restrictions imposed upon it by the fierce pedantries of those who would define a form for it” (“Contemporary Novel” 134, 152). Though Wells never mentions Henry James by name, critics have usually considered James to be the main target of his attack on the restrictions of a high formalist aesthetic (cf., for instance, Robert Bloom 10). At the time, Wells’s defense of unconventional form and subject matter struck many readers as rather experimental; even James’s critique refers to Wells’s novelistic methods as exemplary of “the New Novel” (“Younger Generation” 178-79).

Simultaneously, however, Henry James was in his criticism setting the groundwork for a literature of specialists, a carefully sculpted literature whose only value lay in technical perfection, whose only epistemological or social worth was the light it shed into the vagaries of “character.” In a letter written to Wells on January 20, 1902 and publicized by Percy Lubbock’s 1920 edition of James’s letters, James lays the basis for his critique of Wells’s work—Wells’s developing attempts to be a “prophet” cause him to “simplify” “to excess” (75-76). This problem is not unique to Wells, but is, rather, an inherent flaw in the work of prophet figures. “I can’t imagine,” James complains, “a
subtilizing prophet” (76). In his civilized but brutal attack on Wells in his 1914 essay, “The Younger Generation,” James depicts Wells’s increasingly slipshod craftsmanship as a product of his ever-expanding interpretive claims. “The more he [Wells] knows and knows, or at any rate learns and learns . . . the greater is our impression of his holding it good enough for us, such as we are, that he shall but turn his mind and its contents upon us by any free familiar gesture and as from a high window forever open” (James “Younger Generation” 190). Wells, James complains, often fails to provide key information on character motivation, sacrificing character creation to his desire to quickly and loudly advance his plot and beliefs (“Younger Generation” 190-92).

At the time of James’s critique of his work, Wells’s literary prestige was enormous. He was widely read among the general public, influential among intellectuals, and considered a cutting-edge novelist by such experimentalists as Ford Madox Ford and D. H. Lawrence (Cheyette xv). Ford had fought (successfully) to serialize Wells’s *Tono-Bungay* in his *English Review* and D. H. Lawrence had dubbed the same novel to be the best English novel in years. Wells’s influence on younger authors was visible even to his antagonists. One of the sins with which James charges Wells (and Bennett) in “The Younger Generation” is the creation of D. H. Lawrence (180). As Malcolm Cowley observed twenty years later, in the Edwardian epoch Wells’s “influence was wider than that of any other living English author” (245). At the time of their controversy, James’s novels sold fewer copies than Wells’s did, but his prestige as a critic was, as Wells and his fictional protagonists often complained, immense: “You can't now talk of literature without going through James. James is unavoidable. James is to criticism what Immanuel Kant is to philosophy” (“Art, Literature” 242). The two antagonists appeared
evenly matched when James devastatingly deconstructed Wells’s theory and practice of the novel, redefining Wells’s “freedom of form” as “technical laxity” and his “interpretive scope” as “intellectual hubris.”

The Wells/James controversy and its aftermath comprise an important moment in the professionalization of literary writing. Wells and James were both, as Trotter observes, literary contributors to the rise of professional society (128-33). As Perkin notes, Wells’s vision of a World State run by the Open Conspiracy or the Samurai is essentially a fantasy of middle-class professional world domination (363). Critics have not, however, discussed the quarrel between James and Wells as reflecting a stage in the professionalization of literary writing. Perhaps surprisingly, the logic of professionalism ultimately works against Wells’s vision of a world ruled by experts. Professions, due to their self-authenticating nature, are highly invested in demarcating the branch of knowledge they represent and the skills they embody from those of all other professions. They are invested in splitting and fragmenting knowledge. Wells’s goals of getting all the world into the novel, of narrating all of human experience, and of, with other experts, ruling a united world cut against the inner logic of professionalism. James’s criticism, on the other hand, provides literature as a discipline with a discrete set of skills (focus, unity of plot, intensity of impression, etc.) and a distinct subject matter (the subjective experience of character) that can serve as its unique province. Given this context, it is not surprising that, although Wells and James appeared evenly matched at the moment of their intellectual conflict, James’s victory was complete. As Trotter notes and Perkin implies, the modernist movement that began in force around 1914 defined itself largely in terms of literary professionalism (Trotter 9, Perkin 393).
And so it happened that after 1918 the intelligentsia no longer saw Wells’s works as experimental and prophetic, but instead as sloppy, preachy failures that did not meet the standards of a specialized profession. Rebecca West, for instance, simultaneously mocks Wells’s interpretations of prehistory and his poor characterization in a brief parody relating a Wellsian protagonist’s attempts to seduce a young woman through talk of “the Piltdown skull and the St. Valerie kneecap” (“Uncle Bennett” 206). Virginia Woolf in “Modern Fiction” repeats James's basic charge that Wells “in the plethora of his ideas and facts” fails to notice the “coarseness of his human beings,” adding the political implication that “the inferiority” of Wells’s characters “tarnish[es] and refutes his ideals” (2149). In a stunning attack on Wells’s failures at specialization and characterization, Woolf complains that his novels take on “work that ought to have been discharged by government officials . . . Yet what more damaging criticism can there be both of his earth and of his Heaven than that they are to inhabited here and hereafter by his Joans and his Peters?” (Woolf 2149, emphasis mine). Other specialists, especially academic historians and scientists who had better kept up with changes in biology, also mocked Wells’s works, mostly for their very scope. As Montgomery Belgion complained in the Criterion (1935), Wells’s obsession with “rare and precious topics” blinds him to the fact that “historians, economists, and politicians” are equipped to speak on their respective subjects, and he is not (317). H. L. Mencken, as usual, expressed a popular sentiment in contrarian guise when he mourned that Wells had wasted his talent by pursuing “three separate careers”—biology, literature, and prophecy—rather than sticking with a single specialization (567). For the World State to be born, Wells needed the literary specialists to join the Open Conspiracy, and they instead deemed him insufficiently specialized and
destroyed his reputation. After 1916 Wells’s novels were largely ignored by both the public and the critics, and after 1927 his nonfiction was received with similar disinterest (Robert Bloom 4-5). Overviews of his career concluded, as a whole, “that Wells’s intellectual influence was not profound and his literary influence had been exhausted by 1915” (Scheick Critical 10).

Wells was well aware of this state of affairs. In the preface he wrote for Geoffrey West's authorized biography, Wells recognizes the extent of his literary opposition—which encompasses the authors whom we would now call modernist—grouping James Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James together as the “deliberate writer[s]” of whom he is the “absolute antithesis” (xvii-xviii). In the Bulpington of Blup, published two years before his first autobiography, Wells worries about the avant-garde status of his opponents, portraying the literary journal The Feet of the Young Men (an obvious parody of The Little Review down to its funding by rich patrons, location in Paris, and difficulties with obscenity laws) as both the voice of modernism and as a reactionary conspiracy against the World State. This journal’s innovative rhetorical strategy—using experimental and often obscene art to destroy people’s hope of change in the world—makes it “the latest thing in reaction” (Wells Bulpington 347). This journal’s “air” of “going one better than progress” reflects Wells’s fear that the intellectuals’ refusal to endorse his plans will doom his plans to failure, that the world will continue to change, as evolutionarily it must, but will not progress in a Wellsian fashion, and will instead retrograde (Wells Bulpington 347). An Open Conspiracy of highly trained professionals has, it seems, turned against Wells. Geoffrey West's authorized biography of Wells, cited repeatedly in Wells’s first autobiography, grants that its subject's
“influence with the post-war intelligentsia of England and American is all but imperceptible” (252). Geoffrey West also concludes that when Wells abandoned character-centered subjectivism for prophecy he gave himself over to a dream and delusion (248-49). By the time of his *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells has lost interpretive control over himself and his work; he has been rejected by the professional classes whose world rule he had preached, and has become a discarded relic even in the pages of his own authorized biography.

II: The Outline of a Persona: An Experiment in Autobiography

Wells approaches the task of creating an autobiographical self traumatized by his loss of interpretive control over his own work. As I have shown, James’s attack has set the terms for the accepted view of Wells, and Wells’s own writings have been used by such critics as Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West to support this view. Wells lacks, to an extreme degree, the pliant audience his system—and, Walter Benjamin suggests, all totalistic systems—requires if it is to work. At the beginning of *The Open Conspiracy*, Wells virtually begs the reader for silence and submission, to listen to him without complaining, to try to comply with his requests, to give the work a chance (ix). Wells faces instead a cacophony of objections. He is not successfully writing his interpretations onto reality; others are writing their interpretations onto him. He is traumatized by this switch from interpreting subject to interpreted object and the problem in reception that caused it to happen. Freud defines trauma as an unexpected event that, due to the self’s lack of anticipatory fear, passes into the self unfiltered and uninterpreted, becoming an alien thing within the self (*Beyond* 21, 24). Wells’s loss of authority and prestige at the hands of James came as an entire shock, and in keeping with Freud’s formulation that the trauma victim is compelled to repeat the traumatic incident until it can be mastered by
narrative and the unity of the self can be restored, Wells discusses James almost compulsively in his first autobiography (cf. Freud Beyond 9-10, 24).

The opening of the Experiment in Autobiography, which I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, shows Wells struggling with his loss of prophetic authority, with the inability of his words to effect what they signify. He needs “an assurance that” the literary work he has “produced, when [he] ha[s] done [his] best on it, [will] be properly significant and effective” (Wells Experiment 5). He knows, however, that his work often receives a weak reception and always fails to effect what it signifies. Contemporary intellectual experts show a total “disregard of [his] effort” (Wells Experiment 11). Irritatingly active readers, these specialists deconstruct Wells’s works as they read them. As he complains, “They will not adapt my results; they will only respond to fragments of them” (Wells Experiment 11). Though he grants the legitimacy of some of the criticisms of his work, Wells connects the poor quality of much of his oeuvre to this very problem, the gap between intention and reception. He writes, “Much of my work has been . . . hurried and inadequately revised, and some of it as white and pasty as a starch-fed nun. I am tormented by a desire for achievement that outruns my capacity” (Wells Experiment 5).

All the sage autobiographers in my study obsessively narrate incidents of failed textual reception, incidents in which a rival interpretation of the sage’s work comes to have more authority than the sage’s own interpretation, and the sage’s work thus comes to serve as evidence against his system rather than evidence for it. Wells’s case is particularly extreme, however, because of his sense of the instability of reality. If, due to the instability and pliability of the world, whatever interpretations the intellectual elite decides to impose on humanity will in time become real, then the literati’s interpretations of Wells’s self and work will, if unchecked, eventually become valid. Wells turns to autobiography in this situation because autobiography allows him, as no other genre
would, a place where all his failures in reception can be narrated and, through narration, reconciled with his philosophical system.

More simply, Wells turns to autobiography in his attempt to regain his authorial authority because biographies of him are already in wide circulation. He must interpret the interpretations of his life that have already been published if he is to regain his status as a sage, as a master interpreter. As he observes early in his *Experiment*, his work has given him an “ill-defined prestige,” “an interest that has already provoked biography and may possibly provoke more, and so renders unavoidable the thought of a defensive publication . . . this essay in autobiographical self-examination” (11). Like Carlyle and Newman, he sees in the biographer an inherent threat to his interpretive authority over his own life. In his *Experiment* Wells attempts to gain the interpretive control over the textual sources of information about himself that he needs if he is to force his individual story to cohere, just as in his *Outline* humanity attempts to gain the “increased control of matter” that it needs if it is to force the world to cohere and mean (cf. *Outline* vol. 1 553).

Wells’s *Experiment in Autobiography* is a desperate and often dazzling attempt to interpret his interpreters and rewrite, in the fullest sense, the intellectual history of his time. As Wells attempts, in his own words, to “restor[e]” his “ruffled persona,” the image of Wells as an intellectual and literary has-been, bested by the intellectual specialists as a class (and especially by Henry James) comprises the largest single threat to his authority and to his philosophical system (*Experiment* 708). As Wells defines the persona as a person’s “idea of what he wants to be and of how he wants other people to take him” (*Experiment* 9), the problems of his current persona are precisely problems of reception; the problem of defining the meaning of his self is the problem of imposing his meaning on the world. Thus, to restore his persona, Wells must confront the textual events that have made it most difficult for him to impose his interpretations on the world, especially
the unexpected and devastatingly successful assault of Henry James on his work. As Wells confesses in the middle of a long list of topics the autobiography must discuss, the work must face “the complexities of ambition and rivalry” that have led to his present persona (Experiment 10).

Wells’s invariable tactic against recalcitrant data or traumatic information is to minimize its importance by contextualizing it in light of the grand scheme of things. For example, the Outline of History, Samuel Hynes suggests, is in large part an attempt to control the trauma of World War I by contextualizing it in terms of the vast panorama of the entire history of life on earth (War 321). In keeping with this tendency, Wells attempts to contextualize his particular intellectual battle with the literary specialist Henry James in light of a general theory about the place of specialists in the production of knowledge. Perhaps surprisingly, given the specialists’ (especially the literary specialists’) animosity towards his work, Wells posits that all legitimate knowledge comes from specialists. This admission would seem to suggest the illegitimacy of all Wells’s nonfiction written after his initial biology textbook and the fraudulence of his persona as a prophet. However, Wells adds, since the true specialist can specialize only in one small sector of knowledge, if human knowledge is to become an effective and coherent whole, someone must specialize in relating the basic findings of each discipline to the others. The coherence of human knowledge depends on the existence of a specialist in generalizations who, though master of no one discipline, can piece all disciplines together into a meaningful “outline” of human knowledge. Wells states the point most plainly when discussing the origins of the Outline of History. He writes, “The curious fact dawned upon me that because I was not a ‘scholar’ and had never . . . studied a ‘period’ intensely . . . I had a much broader grasp of historical reality” than did the specialists (Wells Experiment 612-13). It is crucial that humanity possess an outline of knowledge, for without such a “guiding framework for life” (Wells Experiment 12), humanity will be
unable to wisely plan its future. This specialist in outlines, this master of the future, this
revamped and retooled sage, is, of course, Wells; Wells thus hands the discovery of
knowledge over to his critics, but leaves the interpretation in his own hands. Since the
meaning of any given sign depends on its context in a larger system of signs, Wells, as
compiler of the system, is still sole owner of meaning. Wells has, essentially, revived and
adapted for a professionalized society Newman’s concept of the ideal philosopher who
reconciles and coordinates into a unitary system the findings of each branch of
knowledge. He is attempting, in a society in which the professional class possesses most
of the social capital, to defend the sage discourse by paradoxically redefining the sage
project of interpreting the whole of reality as a professional specialization. Stripped of
circumlocutions and scientific verbiage, he is asserting that his ability to make an
overarching meaning for reality out of the plethora of ideas the specialists produce is—
like most professional disciplines, according to Perkin—self-validating. His first job as a
self-proclaimed specialist in generalizations is to define and defend his self.

Strikingly, Wells stakes the coherence of his self (or “persona”) on the same
strategy by which he attempts to defend the possibility of the sage project: the necessity
of the overview or outline, rather than a careful or detailed appraisal, in making meaning.
In chapter one, Wells, fond in all his works of referring to himself under the synecdoche
of a “brain,” describes and evaluates his brain using the same categories he applies in his
discussion of specialists. His brain possesses “a loose inferior mental texture” but
nonetheless possesses an exceptional “general shape and arrangement,” a combination
that gives him an incapacity for detail but a knack for the big picture (Experiment 14, 15).
Though his life story is eminently deconstructable, it too holds together in outline. He
describes his life essentially as a pointillist picture: the chaos of its details is too obvious
to bother pointing out, the trick is to see it whole. As Wells writes, “in my own
behaviour just as in my apprehension of things, the outline is better than the detail. The
more closely I scrutinize my reactions, the more I find detailed inconsistencies, changes of front and goings to and fro. The more I stand off from the immediate thing and regard my behaviour as a whole the more it holds together” (Experiment 18). He refuses to argue about the details of his life, and instead implies that his accusers lack the breadth of mind to see such a life as his as a whole. With regard to both his intellectual authority and the life that in many ways threatens it, Wells lets his critics determine the details, so long as he can interpret the whole. He lays down the sage’s claim of mastery of all experience and the autobiographer’s claim of ownership over his own life, only to take them up again in a more incorruptible form. The apparent concession is actually a strategic withdrawal that renders his interpretive authority more difficult to attack.

In relating his controversy with James, Wells attempts to restore his authority while maintaining his credibility by depicting their conflict as a stalemate. To the literary world, the meaning of the James/Wells controversy is self-evident enough: James conquered, Wells became discredited and out of date. Wells’s primary goal in relating this controversy is to strip it of any self-evident meaning. To argue that he actually won their controversy would strain the credulity of his readers; it would also violate the Experiment’s basic rhetorical strategy (as well as Wells’s basic philosophy) by insisting on the inherent meaning of an individual fact or event. Wells’s insistence on the impossibility of reducing his battle with James to any simple form is reflected even in the description of his notes on the subject, with which the chapter begins. The “folder labeled ‘Whether I am a novelist,,’” in which he “wor[ies] round various talks and discussions [he] had with Henry James,” is “distended and irregularly interesting”; “it refuses to be simplified” and is even “hard to reduce to straightforward explicitness” (Experiment 410).

Wells summarizes James’s attack with painful accuracy. “His gist was plain. If the Novel was properly a presentation of real people as real people, in absolutely natural
reaction in a story, then my characters were not simply sketchy, they were eked out by wires and pads of non-living matter and they stood condemned” (Wells *Experiment* 412).

Wells follows this surprisingly impartial précis of James’s essay “The Contemporary Novel” with the text of a letter sent to him by James. James most memorably complains that the characters in Wells’s novels present merely a “red herring of lively interest” around which his own ideas and “reactions” take shape (qtd. in Wells *Experiment* 413).

Wells shockingly grants that James’s “main indictment is sound, that [he] sketch[es] out scenes and individuals, often quite crudely, and resort[s] even to conventional types and symbols” (*Experiment* 414). Wells quotes from and even—between paragraphs praising its more defensible elements—mocks portions of his own essay on the novel. “What a phrase!” he exclaims after one of the most idealistic of his “brave trumpetings” (Wells *Experiment* 417). In this elaborately intertextual portion of Wells’s autobiographical narrative, a kind of hand-wringing heteroglossia replaces his normal prophetic confidence. James’s voice enters into, interrupts, and even momentarily dominates the narrative.

However, the episode would not seem a stalemate (or smack of heteroglossia) if Wells offered no defense against James’s charges, if the competing languages in the text did not neutralize each other. The key point of Wells’s long and complex counter-argument is that James’s careful character portraits give no attention to the “rigid” societal “frame of values” that confine his characters, whereas Wells’s more grainy portraits allow the “splintering frame” of a collapsing and restrictive society and epistemology to come into focus and even “ge[t] into the picture” (*Experiment* 416). Since “fiction [i]s necessarily fiction through and through,” if verisimilitude or standards of characterization are violated in service of this larger goal, the transgression is minimal (Wells *Experiment* 415). Fiction should not, anyway, be tailored to the “fastidious
critic”’s standards, but is inherently validated if it reaches its audience successfully (Wells *Experiment* 418).

Wells’s argument is persuasive to postmodern ears, and it should come as no surprise that more than one critic has used this point to reinterpret Wells’s later novels as postmodern. There is one possibly fatal problem in his logic, however. Wells vindicates himself through his influence on the reader rather than the critic; the reader’s response seems for a moment to settle the issue in Wells’s favor. However, by time of writing, Wells has not written a novel that proved a popular or critical success in nearly two decades. Wells clearly recognizes this problem, as he proceeds immediately from reliving his argument with James to recounting briefly but exactly, with damning quotes and all, the unfavorable reception of every novel he has written since 1917. To relate some highlights from this grim litany, Wells mourns that *Joan and Peter* (1918) never inspired "a good word" (420), that "few people share [his] liking" for *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham* (1930) (421), and that *Mr. Blettsworthy* (1928) and *Men Like Gods* met with a "very tepid reception" (*Experiment* 421). In an attempt to preserve his interpretive credibility, Wells responds to this litany of failure by ceding to James the concrete point. He grants that he should not have neglected the individual personality; the ultimate aim of re-ordering the world is, after all, a better life for individuals. The stalemate persists, however, as James’s novels do not question current society and so could not re-order the world. On the whole, Wells’s portrayal of his conflict with James is a polyphonic chaos in which the rivals are, as Wells observes, "both incompatibly right" (*Experiment* 414). Wells’s insistence that his controversy with James possesses no clear or inherent meaning is nuanced and surprisingly unbiased, but actually fits nicely into his overarching narrative rhetoric. In granting James’s concrete point, he allows James to occupy the role that he has theorized for specialists as a whole: within the bounds of his discipline, James generates legitimate knowledge. However, the specialist, by the nature of his position,
cannot interpret the knowledge he generates in the broader context as human thought as a whole. The interpretation of knowledge remains a job for which Wells alone is suited. If, as Wells suggests, his controversy with James possesses no inherent meaning, then he can interpret this controversy in the same manner in which he interprets all of recorded history: it is a seemingly meaningless event which takes on meaning when contextualized as a prelude to a meaningful future.

A turn towards the future dominates the last few pages of Wells’s discussion of James. Wells suggest that his own neglect of the individual may have been merely a temporary, albeit necessary, stage in his intellectual development. He had to “reconstruct” his society’s intellectual “frame” before he could place individuals “into this frame” (Wells Experiment 422). Wells suggests that in the World State people, freed from the restraints imposed upon them by the material world, will discover much about individuality. He does not claim that any of his works have as of yet adequately treated the subject of individuality, but implies that, just as the men of the future World State will be able to reconcile James’s insights about individual character with Wells’s insights about social structures, the Wells of the future may be able to successfully absorb the best elements of James’s thought. “I am,” he insists, “taking more interest now in individuality than ever I did before” (Wells Experiment 422).

Wells concludes these rather cautious speculations about the future by suddenly and dramatically alleging that the novel as we know it today is only an inferior form of biography and autobiography and that, consequently, in the future novels will not exist. The novel, he suggests, is only biography and autobiography trying to evade libel laws. Once libel laws are weakened (which he predicts will happen in the not-too-distant future), we will be able to get at the truths of individuals’ lives without recourse to the veil of fiction. The novel will likely “dwindle and die altogether and be replaced by more searching and outspoken biography and autobiography” (Wells Experiment 422). “The
race of silly young men who announce that they are going to write The Novel [clearly, the modernists, with their exacting, Jamesian canons of criticism] may follow the race of silly young men who used to proclaim their intention of writing The Epic, to limbo” (Wells Experiment 423). In the future, Wells not-so-subtly implies, all his modernist rivals will be unread, and his current book, this very autobiography, will interpret all related works.

Wells’s apparent stalemate with James is actually a dialectical rewriting of their conflict, in which the thesis Wells-as-novelist-of-ideas and the antithesis James-as-novelist-of-character are resolved in the synthesis Wells-as-autobiographer, writing a character study of a man of ideas. Again, a future world interpreted by Wells alone atones for the inadequacy of the uninterpretable present; the present fact that is given meaning by its context in Wells’s future-oriented outline of knowledge is not so much interpreted as eradicated, and the present world is not so much understood as replaced. This autobiography is “that major task that will atone for the shortcomings of what [he] has done in the past” that Wells dreams of writing in the early pages of the volume (Experiment 7); as Trotter posits of the modernists, Wells has replaced the present world with his book. As in the future there will be no more novels, Wells’s conflict with James is of no ultimate relevance. Unlike the Victorian sages, Wells reaches a temporary resolution for his trauma not through a masterful interpretation and careful exegesis of the traumatic event, but by means of a future-oriented fantasy.

Having deprived the conflict with James of its seemingly self-evident meaning and uniquely traumatic significance, Wells can now dispose of modernism as a whole by applying his general rhetorical ploy against the specialists. Returning to James one hundred pages later, Wells explains that “literary artists” like Joseph Conrad and Henry James are specialists at receiving sense impressions and depicting these impressions vividly (Experiment 529). The intensity of their impressions, however, overwhelms the
capacity of their minds to systematize and unify information, and thus their works lack coherence (Wells *Experiment* 529). The modernists write from a fragmented consciousness precisely because “their abundant, luminous impressions” of material reality cannot easily be “subdue[d] to a disciplined and co-ordinating relationship”; their minds are too “powerfully receptive” to have a “central philosophy” (Wells *Experiment* 529). A mind like Wells’s—a mind “systematically unified” but marked by “coldness and flatness of . . . perceptio[n]”—is needed, then, to interpret their works to the world (Wells *Experiment* 529). Wells, in this capacity the anti-Ruskin, bases his interpretive authority on his blindness to individual objects. He alleges that his famous sage works, such as the *Outline of History*, were achieved only because, as he aged, he “lost precision and [his] generalizations grew wider and stronger,” because he has come to value the individual object “only in relation to something else—a story, a thesis” (*Experiment* 537, 528).

Wells cedes the very act of noticing present reality to the literary specialists, but retains himself the right to interpret their works and, by implication, reality. Wells’s lack of a sense of the individual, first a liability, then a neutral trait, has now become a positive good.

Wells feels free to narrate his career as a sage and his plans for the World State only after he has put the James controversy and his modernist rivals behind him. This narrative structure is all the more striking because Wells relates the James controversy entirely out of chronological order. This controversy occurred in 1914, but Wells places his detailed discussion of the subject prior his chapter on the events of 1895, the year in which he published *The Time Machine* and first became a public figure. He places his last mention of the James controversy some pages prior to his chapter on the events of 1900, the year in which he issued *Anticipations* in serial and began his career as a prophet. His autobiography’s chronologically-based structure not withstanding, Wells can narrate himself as a prophet only after his most damaging controversy and most
recalcitrant public experience has, through narration and interpretation, been absorbed into the Wellsian outline of knowledge. Once this damage has been absorbed, Wells promptly begins narrating his sagedom; indeed, he hardly narrates anything else. The one-hundred fifty-eight-page final chapter “The Idea of a Planned World” begins seventeen pages after the last mention of his arguments with James, and eight pages after his general discussion of the literary world. His rivals now apparently silenced, Wells can freely describe how the present world is in the process of becoming the future world whose meaning belongs to him alone. He can describe how he began “writing the human prospectus” (Wells *Experiment* 552).

In this respect, the structure of Wells’s *Experiment* is an almost frightening exaggeration of the general structure of the Victorian intellectual autobiography, in which narrative is abandoned after the ideals and shape of the adult self are set. Wells largely abandons narrative once he has invented not just his own self but his own world. The final pages of the work are full of Wells’s triumph over the present world, of his authority restored. In the work’s last chapter there are no interruptions by the likes of Henry James; by the final pages of the work, no one save Wells can really speak. In the *Experiment*’s final pages, Wells finds even the attacks of his intellectual enemies to be, when contextualized in light of the coming World State, an unintended form of praise. Their protests may be loud, but they possess no positive meaning; these protests serve only as evidence that “the supporters of the thing that is” are angrily aware that their grip on the world is “slipping” (Wells *Experiment* 704-5). Even Wells’s enemies are “touched by doubt” in their own positions and “do not believe” “in their hearts” that Wells is “essentially wrong”; therefore, unable and secretly unwilling to resist the coming of the Wellsian future, they incoherently yell (Wells *Experiment* 704-5). For the moment, anyway, Wells has constructed a perfectly totalistic system. Walter Benjamin notes that even medieval allegories cease to have a clear, single meaning at moments when the
devil is allowed to talk back to God (227); by the end of the Experiment, even when
Wells’s demons are allowed to speak, it is the voice of the Open Conspiracy we hear. As
the book ends, Wells again feels himself to be entirely self-contained; the constructed
unities of his self and world have triumphed over the chaos of individual objects. Though
the Experiment’s overall narrative arc, based subtly on the consolidation of literary
authority, has never been sketched by any critic, Wells evidences several times that he is
entirely aware of the general structure and effect of the work. In the final pages of the
book, he comes quite close to summarizing my argument:

I began this autobiography primarily to reassure myself during a phase of fatigue,
restlessness and vexation, and it has achieved its purpose of reassurance. I wrote
myself out of that mood of discontent and forgot myself and a mosquito swarm of
bothers in writing about my sustaining ideas. My ruffled persona has been
restored and the statement of the idea of the modern world-state has reduced my
personal and passing irritations to their proper insignificance. . . . this faith and
service of constructive world revolution does hold together my mind and will in a
prevailing unity. (Experiment 705, emphasis mine)

Synthesis has been achieved and his ideals vindicated.

The public reception of the work gave Wells some grounds for his sense that he
had successfully restored his persona and his system. Alone among his works after
Outline of History (published fifteen years earlier), Experiment in Autobiography was a
success with both critics and the public (cf. Sheick Critical Response 12). The
Experiment proved to be the only outstanding success of the last twenty years of Wells’s
career. Of the many positive (or largely positive) reviews the work received, Malcolm
Cowley's was the most insightful and best remembered. Cowley memorably observed
that Wells’s ability to, after many years spent writing awful books, suddenly pen an
autobiography that “stands with the best of his earlier works” seems “close to . . . a
miracle” (245). “Experiment in Autobiography is . . . I think, the best of his novels”
(Cowley 246).
Though Wells’s autobiography, against rather heavy odds, managed a positive reception, the book did not fully restore Wells’s authority. To gain the authority Wells desired, his autobiography would have had to end the multiplicity of possible interpretations of his work, rewrite the whole world, and bring on the Wellsian future. For most critics, the most appealing aspect of the volume was the complicated, humorous, and even self-condemning tone in which much of the first two-thirds of the volume was narrated. As we have observed, Wells handles his controversy with James and other difficult matters through a kind of Hegelian dialectic; he can be sympathetically bemused with both his past self (thesis) and past antagonists (antithesis) because his future self and future world will serve as a third term that will triumphantly resolve this conflict. The first two-thirds of the book lead with a perhaps thinly concealed inevitability to the final third of the work, “The Idea of a Planned World,” in which Wells’s world and self are restored. Many readers (at least among reviewers) read the work in a more deconstructive manner, however. They simply praised the first two-thirds of the work and panned the final third. For instance, the Criterion’s largely negative review concluded that the Experiment's literary dimensions replicate Wells’s career, a strong, character-centered start squandered midway for the “wild-goose chase” of the “pursuit of the world-state” (319). As this comment suggests, Wells was still being judged by Jamesian standards and found wanting. The threat of James had not been conquered but tentatively contained. Wells’s complaints from the opening pages of the Experiment still applied; the specialists continued to respond to individual elements of his work and ignore his conclusions entirely. The autobiography tended to be praised where it lived up to Jamesian standards for characterization, and criticized where it failed to live up to these standards. The most frequently criticized aspects of the work—the final section’s preachiness and oversimplifications, and the book’s general failure to develop some key aspects of Wells’s character—are the very aspects of Wells’s writing to which
James had objected some twenty years prior. Despite the general success of the volume, Wells remains interpreted rather than interpreter; James’s definitions continue to demarcate the profession of writing.

The aspect of Wells’s character that the Experiment most notably fails to fully develop are his sexual proclivities, which by the time of its writing had long been famous. Many of Wells’s novels are patently autobiographical in this regard, and he seduced a number of women also given to writing autobiographical novels (including, for instance, Dorothy Richardson) (cf. David Smith 212-13). Between 1906-1914 alone, he had at least five major affairs, innumerable one night stands, and three children out of wedlock, each by a different woman (David Smith 210-11). By 1907, his theory and practice of free love were being used by his critics to impugn his positions (David Smith 210). By the 1920s, some of his affairs had already triggered protests as far away as New England (cf. Ray 128). To make matters worse, these romantic escapades are not only a scandal that he has failed to absorb into his persona, they are also a matter about which Wells has issued patently false statements. Just a couple of years earlier, he had claimed to his biographer Geoffrey West that “No story [of his affairs] has ever faced the light. [because] There is no story that cannot face the light” (173). Wells admitted only that he had “transgressed” the prudish mores of reactionary snobs by being seen in public with too many intelligent women (Geoffrey West 173). As the Criterion complains, Wells’s promise to be forthcoming in the Experiment about his famous romantic life “turns out to have been a vain gesture” (319).

Reviewers of the Experiment were quick to connect Wells’s failure to provide motive and detail for his characters’ love affairs with his failure to be forthcoming about his own. In the reviews, complaints about Wells not being forthcoming are paired suspiciously often with asides about his poor private judgment. Like James, many critics connected one or both of these deficiencies to Wells’s prophetic pretensions. H. L.
Mencken scoffs that Wells’s characters are only “sandwich-men” for his ideas and that no man with such poor “private judgment” should be allowed to give humanity his “counsel” (567). Cowley, despite his generally positive review, makes the same complaint with greater clarity. The Experiment’s final chapter, “The Idea of a Planned World,” is, he writes, “obviously and immensely inferior to everything that has gone before” both because Wells cannot write “candidly” about his later private life “without hurting the reputations of people still alive” and because the “Open Conspiracy” around which it is centered is a “dream that has nothing to do with the shape of things as they are” (247).

The front page review in the Times Literary Supplement was probably the most widely read review of the work, and it was in some ways the most damning. Virtually from the outset, the TLS review focuses on the Wells/James controversy. The reviewer quickly mentions Wells’s complaint that “the bulk of his fictional work since the war” has been “persistently undervalued,” and then offers to justify the common appraisal (“Mr. Wells” 761). The reviewer posits that in both life and art ideas can become real only when incarnate in individuals. It follows that Wells’s neglect of the individual renders his novels bad and his ideas ridiculous; “the issue is most clearly stated in his reply to Henry James’ criticisms of Marriage, the justice but not the relevance of which he admits” (“Mr. Wells” 761). Wells wishes to remake humanity, but humanity does not seem particularly interested in being remade. And so Wells, rather than give up his plans for remaking humanity, gives up his understanding of humanity as it actually exists. Wells’s vision of the World State will fail to materialize for precisely the reasons that his novels have failed. These same deficiencies cause his autobiography, though its “analytical apparatus” is impressive, its story often “striking” and its style full of “intimacy and humour and directness,” to fall short of being a classic (“Mr. Wells” 761).
Despite the general success of the work, *The Experiment* did not entirely restore Wells’s authority. The public reception of his quarrels with James and the modernists still proved a problem, and his autobiography, by its reticence about romantic matters, had failed in its attempt to use James’s game of character development to shore up Wellsian ideals. The interpretive play surrounding Wells’s work, so carefully foreclosed by Wells in the final pages of the *Experiment*, begins again with the book’s first reader. As the *Times*’ criticisms of Wells’s failure to understand human nature should remind us, the *Experiment* has also done nothing to tackle Wells’s unresolved conflict with Chesterton, who goes almost unmentioned in the volume. As I shall shortly discuss at more length, in his attacks on literary and political specialists, Wells leaves his rival sage unscathed.

III: The Quest for the Ideal Audience: H. G. Wells Beds Modernism and Catholicism

One of the distinguishing marks of trauma for Freud is the trauma victim’s compulsive repetition of the traumatic event. The trauma victim must replay the traumatic event over and over again until he or she can narrate it coherently, and through narration incorporate it into a preexistent understanding of the self. More than any other sage autobiographies in this study, Wells’s two autobiographies embody the idea of traumatic repetition. One of the clearest signs that Wells’s textually constructed authorial self has suffered a traumatic blow and general loss of unity and coherence at the hands of Henry James is the frequency with which Wells returns to the subject of James and Jamesian literary theories. As Wells writes near the end of *Experiment in Autobiography*, the coherence and unity of his authorial persona are derived from his role as the prophet of the World State. Consequently, since any concerted opposition to his ideas, especially by intellectual specialists and public authors, constitutes a roadblock for the coming World State, any such opposition also constitutes a threat to the coherence of his
authorial persona. The reviews of the *Experiment*, with their praise of Henry James and mockery of Wells’s attempts at characterization, evidence that the book, despite its general popular and critical success, has not undone the critical opposition to Wells; in the literary community—the very group of specialists that must propagandize the World State if it is to come into being—Wells still serves as evidence of James’s theories rather than James of Wells’s. Thus, the reviews of the *Experiment* then themselves become a crisis for Wells’s authority, which he must narrate and interpret within the terms of his system if he is to regain his full credibility as a sage and remove a potential obstacle to the coming of the World State. And so, within months of finishing the *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells begins another autobiography that, like the *Experiment*, is designed to atone for his past shortcomings, capture all recalcitrant accounts of himself, and inaugurate the new world. In fact, the posthumously titled *H. G. Wells in Love* begins by referencing the reviews of *Experiment in Autobiography* and apologizing for the “suppression” of his love affairs after 1900, a mistake that while legally necessary, “dimm[ed] the easy frankness of the work” and left out matters of “considerable importance” (51-52).

While *H. G. Wells in Love* was not Wells’s title for the work, it does accurately summarize the book’s contents, a series of accounts of his major love affairs. As if in response to complaints that his previous work was not sufficiently character-centered or forthcoming about his romantic history, each chapter is named after and focused on a character in his life, a woman with whom he had an affair. Like Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*, Wells’s second autobiography narrates his life as a sage through indirection, by means of extensive sketches of his relationships with others. Although Wells’s love affairs provide the structure of *H. G. Wells in Love*, I would allege that, like Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*, the work’s primary concern is the author’s literary authority. Wells’s long-term mistresses were usually tied to the problem of his literary authority. Wells had a tendency to seduce
women who functioned as surrogates of his literary rivals; what he couldn’t conquer in the book, he attempted to conquer in the bed. My discussion of Wells’s seductions obviously assumes Eve Sedgwick’s theory of homosociality, in which male desire is triangulated through the women who serve as its apparent objects towards the “more fully entitled males” to whom these women presumably belong (21, 36-37). I will, however, be using Sedgwick’s theory in a more metaphorical sense than Sedgwick herself, as the women whom Wells desires belong to his rivals intellectually rather than physically. Wells’s primary attraction, as he narrates it, to the two lovers whom I will principally discuss, Rebecca West and Odette Keun, is that they are fellow writers either presently or formerly affiliated with schools of thought that he considers his rivals (modernism and Catholicism, respectively). In relating his seduction of these women, Wells puzzles through the problem of how one reduces a rival speaker (or writer) to the status of an adoring audience, an independent agent to a subject lover. He explores, in short, the means by which he might be able to create the cooperative intellectuals and subject masses he requires if his World State is to come into being. Rebecca West—a critic of Wells largely silenced for years, and occasionally induced to praise him, by her role as the mother of his child (Anthony West)—experiences the fate Wells would wish on all his critics. The amorous quest of Wells in Love is the quest for the perfect audience, a world of people who will allow Wells to inscribe meaning on them, will not talk back, and will never abandon him.

The opening chapter of Wells in Love, “On Loves and the Lover Shadow,” presents an elaborate theory of audience and its role in the construction of identity. Wells has realized an oversight in the Experiment’s psychological theories. As I have discussed, Wells developed the idea of the “persona,” the dominant self-conception that orders one’s social behavior and enables social interaction, as a means of explaining the necessary illusion of the individual self. He also entertained a hope that a persona that
encompassed all the events of one’s life and repressed none, a persona that (though entirely constructed) truly unified the self might be possible. What this theory of the persona implicitly assumes, but does not directly acknowledge, is that, since the primary purpose of the persona is social, if a persona is to be entirely valid and stable, the whole of society must affirm it. Lacking this total affirmation, the persona, Wells’s “wobbling, working self,” wobbles more than works. To be valid, the meaning of his persona, like the meaning of his world, requires universal acceptance. Wells’s new psychological theory supplements the idea of the persona by suggesting that, since other people affirm our personas in at best a limited and qualified way, the psyche makes up for this problem in reception by imagining an ideal audience, the Lover-Shadow, that affirms our personas unconditionally. Else, we would have no personas at all. Wells defines the Lover-Shadow as a “vague various protean but very real presence” always at the persona’s side offering it perfect “understanding” and acceptance (H. G. Wells 54). The Lover-Shadow, “the inseparable correlative to the persona,” is an audience that never argues or disputes the persona, that talks back to the persona only to say, “‘Right-O,’ or ‘Yes’ or ‘I help’ or ‘My dear’” (H. G. Wells 54). As he observes, if the Experiment in Autobiography’s “sustaining theme” was “the development and consolidation of [Wells’s] persona as a devotee . . . to the evocation of a Socialist World State” the main theme of Wells in Love will be the “Lover-Shadow by which [his] persona was sustained” (Wells H. G. Wells 55, 112).

This fantasy of perfect reception is the necessary condition for all Wells’s efforts in life. As he says, “The fundamental love of my life is the Lover-Shadow” (H. G. Wells 61). The Lover-Shadow, Wells asserts quite explicitly, is the true audience desired by himself and all serious authors; “Books, poems, pictures; it is for the Lover-Shadow they are written” (Wells H. G. Wells 54). In his sense that his works require an audience created simply to read them, Wells, the twentieth-century, middle-class sage, resembles
the hierophantic early nineteenth-century Romantic poets, and his theory of the Lover-Shadow resembles Percy Shelley’s theory of “the soul within the soul” (cf. Riede 14, Shelley 503). However, Wells, unlike the Romantic poets, can sustain his constructions of authority only if his ideal audience does not remain a fantasy; if the World State is to materialize, he must begin to close the gap between his actual and ideal audiences. As he complains two pages prior to the fantasy of an entirely subdued audience that ends *Experiment in Autobiography*, “Though most of the people in the world in key positions are more or less accessible to me, I lack the solvent power to bring them into unison . . . I can talk to them and even unsettle them but I cannot compel their brains to see” (702). For this reason, the “ship” of the present continues to tarry, never seeming to reach the “port” of the Wellsian future (Wells *Experiment* 702). Wells’s romantic escapades, at least as he narrates them, are prompted by the desire to incarnate the ideal audience in actual readers. He theorizes that “When we make love, we are trying to make another human being concentrate for us as an impersonation or at least a symbol of the Lover-Shadow in our minds” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 55). Unsurprisingly, this incarnation proves an illusion, or at least unsustainable for any length of time. However, even partial success at incarnating the Lover-Shadow props up and sustains the persona, bringing it to a new level of “realization” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 57). The story of Wells’s love affairs, is, quite explicitly, the story of his attempt to create an audience, his “search for its [the Lover-Shadow’s] realization in responsive flesh and blood” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 55). The tangled threads of love affairs and literary rivalries that prompt the second autobiography are inseparably intermeshed.

Wells’s most lengthy and most famous affair was that with Rebecca West, occupying a full decade of their lives. As by the time of the writing of *Wells in Love*, she has become a formidable author whose work includes multiple essays attacking Wells’s fiction and a critical work praising Henry James, she also represents a significant
potential threat to Wells’s authority. Fittingly, as *Wells in Love* narrates, she entered his life as a literary problem. Their relationship began just prior to the Wells/James controversy. Wells read a review by West that attacked his characterization as poor and his ideas as “pseudoscientific,” and he demanded to meet the author; the relationship turned into an affair after she renewed this attack in person (Wells *H. G. Wells* 94-95). Their always troubled relationship was to last the decade 1913-1923, beginning at the height of Wells’s fame and ending after he had already begun his steady decline. To explain the threat West represents to Wells and how he attempts to contain it in *H. G. Wells in Love*, I must first briefly explicate her principal appearance in the *Experiment in Autobiography*.

Wells mentions West in passing at the end of the story of his first meeting with Grant Allen. Grant Allen was a popular literary figure in the 1890s, famous especially for his social issue novel *The Woman Who Did*; by the 1930s he had long been forgotten. The similarities between Allen and Wells, at least as they are presented in this passage, are rather uncanny. Grant Allen, like Wells, was a former science teacher who took to writing to spread his life-long Darwinian convictions. Allen was “a very successful popularizer” of scientific ideas and he also “had a very pronounced streak of speculative originality” (Wells *Experiment* 461). Allen wished to rewrite social codes according to some combination of “biology and socialism” and authored popular works on historical and philosophical subjects to this end (Wells *Experiment* 461). Allen's nonfiction treatises, which were, like many of Wells’s works on weighty topics, “too original to be fair popularization and too unsubstantiated to be taken seriously by serious specialists” were on the whole critically panned (Wells *Experiment* 462). These works were also marred by Allen’s “schoolmaster trick of dogmatism” and his “rash confidence in every new idea that seized upon him” (Wells *Experiment* 461), traits for which Wells had been criticized since his early days as a nonfiction writer; Rebecca West herself, as he
complains in *Wells in Love*, has called him “a nagging schoolmaster” (102). In the *Experiment*, Allen is clearly a doppelganger for Wells, an alternate self who did not change the world, whose fate was instead to be “once much reviled and now rather too much forgotten” (461). The Catholic attacks on the *Outline of History* were also careful to mock Wells’s reliance in his account of prehistory on such scientifically dubious sources as Grant Allen (cf. Chesterton *Everlasting Man* 22).

As Wells sees it, botched execution, mostly due to hasty writing, also haunts Allen's attempts to write a novel that will change society, *The Woman Who Did*. The young Wells’s harsh review of Grant’s novel, long extracts from which are reprinted in the *Experiment*, eerily anticipates the later assaults of James and the modernists on Wells’s work. *A la* Virginia Woolf, Wells alleges that Allen's faulty characterization undermines his work's lofty attempt to create a new ethics of marriage. Wells relates the heart of his attack in a paragraph no more caustic than any other in the review: “It [Allen’s book] is, we are led to infer, an ethical discussion. But is it? The problem of marriage concerns terrestrial human beings, and the ingratitude of the offspring of a plaster cast, though wonderful enough, bears no more on our moral difficulties than the incubation of Semele, or the birth of the Minotaur” (qtd. in *Experiment* 464-65).

It is at this point that Wells introduces one of only two mentions of Rebecca West into the *Experiment*. “Twenty years later I was, by the bye, to find myself in a position almost parallel to that of Grant Allen with my *Passionate Friends*, which in its turn was slated furiously and in much the same spirit by the younger generation in the person of Rebecca West. But I have never been able to persuade myself that I deserved that trouncing as thoroughly as Grant Allen merited his” (465). After this digression, Wells reveals the surprising result of his review. Allen read his review, and instead of responding with fury, “wrote [him] a very pleasant invitation to come and talk to him” at his house (Wells *Experiment* 466). The authors become friends, and Wells remains
something of an admirer of Allen’s for the rest of his life (cf. Wells *Experiment* 461). Whatever Allen’s failings as writer or a remaker of the world, he has seduced Wells; the kindly, older author has silenced the hostile, younger critic.

In this brief excursus, the question of much of *Wells in Love*—can Wells subdue his younger literary rivals?—is introduced, as is the primary method by which the work attempts to answer this question: a narrative of seduction that proves Wells’s potency. The fears that haunt *Wells in Love* also implicitly come up here. Although Allen eliminated Wells as a rival, Allen died an author once “much reviled” and “now. . . much forgotten” (*Wells Experiment* 461). The same fate may await Wells and, therefore, the World State. Obviously Allen did not seduce all his rivals or all his readers. The theories of audience outlined in the early chapters of *Wells in Love* suggest that if one possessed all humanity as a Lover-Shadow, one’s persona would be omnipotent and world-making. But can one seduce the world? If one makes love to embody the Lover-Shadow in a concrete individual, then the obsessive seductions narrated in *Wells in Love*—ranging from major modernists like Dorothy Richardson and Rebecca West, to translators of Wells’s works, to many of Wells’s female readers—seem to be attempts to do just that. Wells, who frequently comments on how often his reputation as promiscuous opened sexual opportunities for him (cf. *H. G. Wells* 95-96, etc.), hopes to seduce his readership by narrating, in his self-deprecating manner, how he has seduced others. Rebecca West, in many ways the ultimate resistant reader and an unquestionable member of the literary elite, is perhaps his ideal conquest.

However, the unmourned death of Grant Allen, whom Wells regards as something of a fellow free-lover and amorist (cf. *Experiment* 466-67), marks these seductions with a melancholy sense of futility from their beginning. In *Wells in Love*, Wells strengthens his association with Allen, bringing him up as he tells the story of his seduction of Rebecca West. “Rebecca called me ‘pseudo-scientific’ in some attack she made on me, and I
asked her to come along and tell me just what she meant by that . . . . I think that
consciously or unconsciously I was imitating Grant Allen’s generous gesture to me after
my slating of his *Woman Who Did* in 1893” (Wells H. G. *Wells 94*). Initially, Wells’s
literal seduction of West proves as effective as Allen’s metaphorical seduction of Wells.
She quickly becomes pregnant, which reduces and at first nearly eliminates her literary
output. Although Wells disclaims any intentionality here (as he disclaims intentionality
in almost all of his affairs; just as Carlyle’s elect automatically follows the true prophet,
Wells’s ideal audience comes to him begging to be seduced), the text suggests otherwise,
linking goal with result. Wells writes, on “our second encounter . . . she became
pregnant. . . . Nothing of the sort was in *our* intention. *She wanted to write.* It should not
have happened, and since I was the experienced person, *the blame was wholly mine*” (*H.
G. Wells* 96, emphasis mine). This blame brought about results not unfavorable to Wells,
however; it largely silenced West as writer and prompted her only positive reviews of his
work. Her first book of criticism, written while she was living with Wells, flatteringly
contrasts his works, which are marked by “genius” and “passion” and focused around
overarching “ideas,” with James’s early works, which are marred by the lack of a “system
of the universe” into which the characters fit (Rebecca West *Henry* 17, 53). This is as
close to an endorsement of the sage project as this fundamentally modernist writer ever
came; perhaps for this reason, while *Wells in Love* attacks West’s “excursions into
general criticism” (102), her single author studies pass without attack.

As *Wells in Love* narrates his romantic life, Wells’s conquest of Rebecca West
constitutes perhaps the most important of his affairs. The course of their affair moves
chronologically in step with the literary world’s love for and later rejection of Wells, and
as a major critic she functions as a synecdoche for the world of culture. Most
importantly, West, while a legitimate literary rival in her own right, also functions as a
surrogate of James. Wells triangulates onto West his desire to make James, the initial
source of the damage to his authority, into, instead, a Lover-Shadow. For this reason, he fixates on West, as on no other mistress, and becomes incapable of imagining the Lover-Shadow “in any other form than hers” (Wells H. G. Wells 110). She eventually breaks up with Wells and moves on; he cannot conceive of letting her go. As there were only about six months between West’s and James’s attacks on Wells, and as they attacked on similar grounds, it is not surprising that he possesses an associative connection between the two. Overall, West’s book on James is also laudatory, at least concerning his later works. She judges nearly all of James’s later works to be “masterpieces” (Henry 98) due to their “marvelously conceived” characters (Henry 88). As she writes, “These [novels] are not, as fools [Wells was one] have pretended, merely rich treatments of the trivial,” for, though James cannot treat abstractions effectively, he does get at the deepest thing in the world, human character, the “secrets” of a heart (Rebecca West Henry 99). Moreover, after her affair with Wells ended, West renewed her attack on his work in very Jamesian terms. As I have shown, in The Strange Necessity (1928) she mocks Wells as an embarrassing Edwardian “uncle” whose slipshod execution and consequently botched characterization conspired with his tendency towards preachiness to keep his talent from ever fully reaching fruition (199-206). Except for the age jokes, these are James’s charges exactly. In Wells in Love, Wells seeks, by relating his affair with West and tenderly recounting the days when she loved him, to gain the control over West’s works that he once had over her life, and thereby to triumph both symbolically and actually over James and the modernists.

However, the affair itself, as Wells relates it, proves to be a less-than-successful attempt to gain an ideal audience; it ultimately serves only to postpone and prolong the trauma of Wells’s poor reception at the hands of literary elite. Wells’s attraction for and problem with West rests in her status as a fellow writer and fellow maker of meanings. In the Wellsian terms of persona (author) and Lover-Shadow (audience), a relationship
between two authors is inherently unstable and unsettling. Which person gets to play the role of the author and which the role of the audience, which person gets to impose interpretations and which has to be interpreted come to be up for grabs. Wells wishes to make the rest of the literary community propagandists for the World State. However, West also seeks to conquer Wells; she is “saturated with literary ambition” and Wells’s “glamour for her” lies in his “flagrant successfulness” (Wells H. G. Wells 95). West tantalizes Wells, but never meets his emotional needs, largely because of her interpretive prowess. As he complains, “Rebecca could produce voluminous imaginative interpretations of action and situation that dwarfed my own considerable imaginative fluctuations altogether” (Wells H. G. Wells 97). With West, Wells must fight about not just the meaning of the world, but the meaning of their very relationship. He seeks an infinitely submissive audience, but finds with Rebecca West, as with the literary community she represents, a relationship that is primarily a “struggle” (Wells H. G. Wells 113).

Wells narrates his relationship with West as, above all, a stalemate resulting from their inability to agree on who was to be author and who was to be audience, who would make interpretations and who would be interpreted. When West demands that Wells divorce his wife Catherine (whom he called, as a nickname, “Jane”) and marry her, Wells explains that he cannot do so precisely because she is incapable of simply being a Lover-Shadow, a receptive audience for someone else’s interpretations:

“Jane is a wife,” I argued, but you [West] could never be a wife.
“You want a wife yourself—you want . . . care and courage and patience behind you just as much as I do.”
“You’ve never taken care of me.”
“Nor you of me.”
It wasn’t in our characters. Our quarreling went on with a score of variations on this perpetual dispute. (H. G. Wells 99)

As Wells observes in so many words, “My long struggle with Rebecca was obviously the fight of two very wilful people to compel each other to accept the conditions of an
uncongenial Lover-Shadow” (H. G. Wells 113). Though both desperately need unconditional endorsement, neither can force the other “to embody” the Lover-Shadow, and so they continually disappoint each other (H. G. Wells 113). Wells says it best. “We loved each other in bright flashes; we were mutually abusive; we were fundamentally incompatible” (Wells H. G. Wells 108). The seeming inevitability of this situation evidences the sense of fate, accident, and tragic frustration that makes Wells in Love, despite its moments of narcissism, a compelling, at times moving, book.

However, Wells’s elaborately and poignantly described stalemate with West does not necessarily indicate that through their relationship he has found a new humility or come to accept the fact others must inevitably differ with him. The careful stalemate between Wells and West in Wells in Love recalls the careful stalemate between Wells and James in Experiment in Autobiography. Wells gives us, essentially, a romantic replaying of his fight with James. This parallel becomes particularly clear when the lovers’ arguments carry over from matters of daily life into the nature of literature. Because Wells and West possess fundamentally different types of mind, systematic versus perceptive, they fundamentally and irreconcilably disagree about what sort of literature is worth writing. As Wells writes, his mind “is not very vivid in its receptions and . . . is obsessed by a necessity to correlate what it apprehends. Rebecca was at the opposite pole to me in both these matters. She saw and felt with an extreme intensity and she could be indifferent to plan and unaware of inconsistencies to an extent that tormented me, so that a considerable antipathy developed between us as writers” (H. G. Wells 100). As befits her temperament, West writes long, impressionistic novels that do not present a unified picture of reality. As Wells complains, “She writes like a loom producing her broad rich fabric with hardly a thought of how it will make up into a shape” (H. G. Wells 102). As befits his temperament, Wells neglects “creative literature” in favor of the Outline of History, his gigantic attempt to interpret all of human experience (Wells H. G. Wells
Wells sums-up West’s complaints: “She came to hate *The Outline of History*. . . . She did not really believe it [history] could have an ‘Outline’” (*H. G. Wells* 100). In the unlikely event that we fail to realize that the opposition between West and Wells is exactly that between modernist and systematizer as explained in the *Experiment*, Wells refers us to the relevant section of that work, “Chapter 8, #5” and complains that West “exalted James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, as if in defiance of me” (*H. G. Wells* 100, 102). Finally, as in his earlier discussion of James, Wells concludes that both antagonists in this controversy are right, that “Neither of us . . . is absolutely wrong about the other” (*H. G. Wells* 102).

However, both the personal and literary contests between Wells and West in *H. G. Wells in Love* are mere professional wrestling, effective to the very extent that the oppositions Wells constructs appear to be legitimately unresolved. If Wells can depict his relationship with West painfully and poignantly, as a chance misery in which no one is clearly right or wrong, then the literary quarrel that Wells lost at the hands of West and James and the public scandal that Wells suffered on account of his affair with West will become just two more particular incidents devoid of inherent meaning. Like all the events of recorded history in the *Outline of History* or all the events of Wells’s life in the *Experiment in Autobiography*, these emotional complexities will constitute a pointillist dot which, if we back up and squint, will fade and become a part of the picture, a point in the grid, a footnote in the outline. *Wells in Love* provides the point, *Experiment in Autobiography* “Chapter 8, Section 5” provides the grid, and the *Experiment*’s second (and only other) passage on West places her into this grid. Wells writes of “Rebecca West”: “I never knew anyone else who could so light up and colour and intensify an impression”; she “had that quality of saying ‘Look’ for me . . . Without such stimulus . . . I do not actively notice them [individual objects, things]” (*Experiment* 79). West is simply another modernist, another specialist in perception, and the antitheses of their
relationship, the endless series of claims and counterclaims over which they argued, finds synthesis in the sadder, wiser Wells who moves on, who, having been forced by West to notice many things, now possesses a larger outline that interprets more disparate materials than ever before. Now he can narrate even West and, without dishonesty or recrimination, assign her to a place in his outline. Though Wells cannot keep West reduced to an audience (the gap between actual audience and Lover-Shadow remains), he does pass again from interpreted to interpreter, as a world without inherent meaning calls for his frame.

Now that Wells’s sage status is largely restored, West exits the text not arguing with him as she has throughout, but affirming his thoughts and attacking his enemies. Just as in the *Reminiscences* Carlyle brings Edward Irving back from the dead to renounce his own opinions and endorse those of Carlyle, in *Wells in Love* Wells brings a much revised Rebecca West back for a final page of endorsements. In a pattern that corresponds exactly with Carlyle’s treatment of Irving, Wells first affirms that he alone has witnessed his rival’s true strength (in this case, her caustic wit) and that his rival’s publicly available writings fail to evidence this trait. Wells mourns that West had a “great” facility for comic “invention,” but, “none of it was ever written down, alas! Most of the fun in Rebecca is lost for ever” (*H. G. Wells* 112). While books by Rebecca West exist, it seems the true West spoke only to Wells and lives no more; the true West remains only in his memory. Of the two “flashes” of her wit that Wells relates to record the true West for posterity, the longer is a nasty mockery of the physical appearance of G. K Chesterton’s brother, Cecil; West says that when Cecil goes swimming, contact with his body causes the entire English Channel to become polluted (*H. G. Wells* 112). Like G. K. Chesterton, Cecil Chesterton was a Catholic convert, a friend of Belloc, an enemy of Wells, a writer, and, most importantly and most obviously, a Chesterton. With this
joke, the true West, a pawn in Wells’s system who works to undermine the enemies of the World State, opens his attack on his next rival.

Wells’s attempts to use autobiographical narration to shore up his authority against the modernists have served as the primary focus of this chapter. Since Wells’s conflicts with the modernists are well known, and since Wells particularly needs the support of the literati and other specialists if his World State (and therefore his system) is to cohere, it is reasonable for my study to highlight them particularly. The potential resistance of the masses to the World State—which Wells found embodied in Catholicism in general and Chesterton in particular—poses, however, a difficulty for Wells of potentially as great a magnitude. In the popular futuristic movie Things to Come (1936), for which Wells wrote the screenplay, after a conspiracy of technocrats has already achieved the World State, a grandiose orator who praises normality, attacks progress, and continually uses the word “jolly” goads a crazed mob into an uprising that threatens to destroy the authority of the technological oligarchy and, thereby, the World State. This uprising constitutes the only rebellion against the World State that Wells imagines in any of his Utopian works (cf. Wagar 224), and it is a rebellion of the masses against the elite, led by a man whose continual praise of normality and use of the word “jolly” (a tick of Chesterton’s that, as I shall show, maddened Wells) marks him as a caricature of G. K. Chesterton. Chesterton represents to Wells both a potentially serious threat to the World State and an unusual rhetorical problem. Part of Wells’s quandary as a twentieth-century sage is that the rhetoric by which he defends himself against his professionalized critics—the necessity of the generalist who unifies the knowledge the specialists produce—also inadvertently serves as a defense of all other sages, even those opposed to him. Chesterton, himself an avowed foe of the specialists’ epistemological dominance, recognizes Wells’s accidental service to him. In the “Prefatory Note” to The Everlasting Man, his attack on The Outline of History, Chesterton “congratulate[s]”
Wells “on having asserted the reasonable right of the amateur to do what he can with the facts that the specialists provide” (6). Wells fights a two front war for his authority, and cannot fight on both fronts simultaneously. The Experiment in Autobiography, concerned especially with buttressing Wells’s literary authority against James and rival specialists, mentions the Catholic opposition to his work only in passing (704) and offers no critique of Chesterton at all.

Narratively exemplifying Wells’s inability to attack the literary specialists without strengthening the position of his rival sages, Experiment in Autobiography portrays Chesterton as a character only to foil him with Henry James. In the paragraphs just prior to Chesterton’s entry into the narrative, Wells criticizes Henry James as a person and author and contrasts James with himself. The deficiencies in James’s person and work are, according to Wells, directly connected. While Wells has always reinterpreted, challenged, even “scuffle[d]” with “Madame Fact” (as he awkwardly dubs reality), James has “never questioned a single stitch or flounce of the conventions and interpretations in which she [Madame Fact] presented herself” (Wells Experiment 453). As a result, James “th[inks] that for every social occasion a correct costume c[an] be prescribed and a correct behaviour defined” (Wells Experiment 453). Confined by the conventions and interpretations of others, James lives a life comically tied to routine, in an elaborate English mansion that seems like a parody of his own genteel works. The basic contrast is clear: James, though he portrays himself as the truest of authors, does not really create his self or characters, for the society in which he lives sets the conditions under which they exist; Wells, by contrast, has freed himself from social conventions and proprieties and is therefore able both to write powerfully and to shape his own life.

Once this basic contrast has been set, Chesterton enters the narrative, and quickly takes on Wells’s role as a foil to Henry James. William James is visiting his brother at Lamb House and Chesterton is staying at an inn next door. William is a correspondent of
Chesterton’s, and, more like a schoolboy than a philosopher, he has taken to climbing a ladder and peering over Henry’s garden wall, hoping to see Chesterton in the flesh (Wells *Experiment* 454). A “terribly unnerved” Henry James catches William peering over his fence, informs him that in England one cannot meet another person without an introduction, and puts the ladder away (Wells *Experiment* 453-54). A heated argument ensues, during which Wells—who was at the time of this story a friend of both the Jameses—arrives. To Wells’s amusement, Henry “appeal[s]” to him, although he is by upbringing lower-class and by personal choice entirely ill-mannered, to intervene and “adjudicate on what was and was not permissible behaviour in England” (*Experiment* 453). Wells fixes the problem by flagging down Chesterton's buggy and introducing the authors. Like Wells, the quintessentially English Chesterton lacks any sense of propriety. “Moist and steamy but cordial,” Chesterton happily converses with William James at length, although both are standing in the middle of a public road (Wells *Experiment* 454). The passage comically contrasts James, enmeshed in a web of conventions that are not actually binding, with the more direct and unconventional Wells and Chesterton. Put bluntly, in the terms of the passage, which equates unconventional behavior with authorial authority, Wells and Chesterton are strong authors and James is a weak one. Just as Wells’s attacks on specialists inadvertently defend his rival sages, this passage’s mockery of James inadvertently praises Chesterton. The *Experiment in Autobiography*, seeking to minimize the threat of James, only increases the size of Chesterton.

Although the *Experiment*, in its efforts to control the threat of James and the specialists, fails to address directly the problem of Chesterton, Wells’s works of the 1930s and 1940s often reference it. Wells is severely disturbed by the threat that Chesterton—as a literary critic, rival sage, and, especially, one of the Catholic Church’s most able spokesmen—represents to his sage project. Paradoxically, Wells sees the Catholic Church as both an institutional expression of the natural impulses of the mass of
humanity and as a totalitarian institution working to force meaning on a pliable but meaningless humanity (cf. Wells *Experiment* 129). This apparent inconsistency is of little moment, however; in either case, whether (as Wells thinks most frequently) the Catholic Church expresses the masses’ natural resistance to the World State, or (as Wells also alleges with some regularity) the Catholic Church embodies a rival “Open Conspiracy” that programs the masses to resist the World State (cf. Wells *Experiment* 487), millions of the uneducated masses follow the teachings of the Catholic Church and their staunch traditionalism stands in the way of the World State. Moreover, as the Catholic Church opposes birth control and abortion, the Catholic masses comprise a prolifically fertile hoard standing in the way of all attempts to recreate humanity by means of eugenics. The Catholic Church represents a force of “successive thousands of millions” of people that are determined to resist the World State, and the Catholic Church’s power seems to Wells to be growing (Wells *Experiment* 129).

By the early 1940s, Wells has come to fear that the “mental cancer” of Catholicism is “spread[ing] itself back to destroy the health and hope of our modern world” (*Crux* 98). Consequently, if the Open Conspiracy can defeat the forces of Catholicism and bring on the World State, when the World State is inaugurated it will allow “no religious toleration,” and Catholicism with its “priestly kidnappers” will in particular be banned (’42 100-1). As Wells writes, “Only one body of philosophy and only one religion, only one statement of man’s relation to the universe and the community can exist in a unified world state,” or the World State will be rent with division and presently come apart (’42 101). Since, as I have shown, Wells in the *Outline of History* and its successors has written what he deems to be the Bible of the World State, his treatment of the Catholic Church, like his idea of the Lover-Shadow, emphatically suggests that his system can tolerate no resistance to his work. The only permissible philosophy and religion is emphatically Wellsian.
One of the greatest sins of the Catholic Church is that it encourages resistance to his work not just in readers, but in writers; it has made writers who might otherwise have been his friends and allies into his enemies and literary rivals. Chesterton had at one point been Wells’s drinking buddy, and Chesterton’s first major work after his highly publicized conversion to Catholicism was *The Everlasting Man*, his assault on the *Outline of History*. As Chesterton did not believe in any overarching model of history (cf. *Everlasting* 37) and was an populist defender of humanity as it actually exists in its current state, *The Everlasting Man* attacks the *Outline of History* primarily with regard to its evolutionary account of human origins. He mocks Wells for confidently explaining how humanity came to be, indeed for even including prehistory in the *Outline of History*. Chesterton argues that, as prehistory means quite exactly, “the time before any connected narratives that we can read,” it follows that “the history of prehistoric man is a very obvious contradiction in terms” (*Everlasting* 42). From the time there is a narrative we can read, humanity has been essentially as humanity is now, marked by the distinguishing marks of the human spirit, religion and art (Chesterton *Everlasting* 32). Consequently, Chesterton concludes, Wells’s cave man is a “muddle” too untrue to be called a “myth” and his Old Man a pure fiction (*Everlasting* 29, 51). Wells was wounded by Chesterton’s turn against him, and tellingly mourns in *’42 to ’44: A Contemporary Memoir*, “I loved Chesterton, before Roman Catholicism tarnished him” (127).

Although *The Everlasting Man* was the best-selling of the Catholic attacks on the *Outline of History*, Wells avoided direct conflict with Chesterton, preferring to counter-attack against Belloc’s more pedantic and less nuanced critique of his work. Instead, Wells launched his most extended attack against Chesterton, like his most extended attacks against many of his other enemies, in a satirical novel. In *The Bulpington of Blup* (1934), the character “Wimperdick the eminent convert and Catholic apologist”—fat, obsessively and reflexively jolly, self-deluded, and lacking in oral hygiene—was
recognized by reviewers as an obvious caricature of Chesterton (*Bulpington* 18).

Wimperdick is foiled with Professor Broxted, a biologist who, like Wells, abandons his discipline for semi-sociological attempts to explain and reform the whole of human life. In *The Bulpington of Blup*, Wells undertakes the controversy with Chesterton that he avoided in his nonfiction. Wimperdick’s debates with Broxted and his allies replay the Chesterton/Wells controversy over the *Outline*, with Wells naturally coming out the victor. Since Wimperdick (whose name suggests his lack of potency, and perhaps Chesterton’s childlessness) relates only straw man versions of Chesterton’s actual arguments, this text avoids the complicated intertextual dynamics (and the possible rhetorical payoffs) of Wells’s autobiographies, but offers Wells a surer triumph. As in the debate between *The Everlasting Man* and the *Outline of History*, in the debate between Wimperdick and the Broxted school evolution and human origins occupy a central position (cf. Wells *Bulpington* 44 ff.). Clorrinda Bulpington, who sides with Broxted, concludes a debate with Wimperdick over evolution by asserting that, because of science, “Nothing is left of . . . your Garden of Eden” (Wells *Bulpington* 47).

Wimperdick replies that popular science, unable to recognize its own philosophical and creedal presuppositions, has succeeded only in replacing “eternal—and sufficient—mysteries” with “delusion and conceit” (Wells *Bulpington* 48, cf. 59-64). As Chesterton observes in *The Everlasting Man*, religion, at least, acknowledges that the world’s origins cannot be known, only believed. Though Wimperdick is portrayed as drunk and delusional, he still sometimes unsettles the novel’s system of values. He persistently proclaims the inevitable victory of the Catholic Church over “Progress and Evolution,” and, worse, converts the novel’s main character, Theodore Bulpington, to Christianity (Wells *Bulpington* 21, 171-84). Uniting the primary threats to Wells’s authority, the converted Theodore helps to found modernism as a literary movement and publishes essays by “Catholic divines” in *The Feet of the Young Men*, the modernist journal he edits.
(Wells *Bulpington* 347). Yet *Bulpington*, in many ways a long daydream of literary authority, inevitably comes to a happy ending: Theodore is discredited and punished for aiding Wells’s literary rivals when, at the very close of the book, he goes mad. It is perhaps uncoincidental that Theodore’s particular form of madness is schizophrenia, a disease associated in early twentieth century psychology with the total loss of authority and agency (cf. Trotter 32-39). Wells’s triumph is complete.

The dedication of *The Bulpington of Blup* reads, “To the critic of the typescript ODETTE KEUN gratefully (bless her).” Odette Keun was one of Wells’s mistresses; her chapter in *Wells in Love* directly follows that on Rebecca West. The dedication of *Bulpington* —a novel in which Chesterton is vanquished, the modernists go mad, and Wells alone really speaks—to Odette Keun accords with the rhetorical and narrative purposes she will serve in his second autobiography. If West is treated in Wells’s autobiographies as a symbol of the threat represented by the modernists and especially by Henry James, Keun is treated as a symbol of the threat represented by the Catholic Church and especially by G. K. Chesterton.

The similarities between G. K. Chesterton and Odette Keun as she is described in *Wells in Love* are striking. Like Chesterton, Keun was an author of nonfiction and something of a wit. Like Chesterton, Keun debuted as a satirist and then became an aggressive Catholic convert. By the age of eighteen, she had published a satirical novel; by the age of twenty-one she had converted to Catholicism and entered a convent (Wells *H. G. Wells* 119-20). Wells continually mentions Keun’s status as a former nun; it is precisely as symbol of the Catholic Church that she interests him. When in *Wells in Love* he first becomes interested in her as a person, he knows only that she is a former “Dominican novice” who admires his books (Wells *H. G. Wells* 124).

In the convent, Keun’s life diverges from Chesterton’s in ways that are themselves significant. She turns from an analog of Chesterton as he is to an analog of
Chesterton as Wells would have him be. In the convent, she becomes filled with “Doubt” after reading something about “Evolution” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 121). Aware now of the “obvious difficulties” in the Catholic position, Keun loses her faith, and becomes lax in her behavior, leading to her expulsion from her religious order (Wells *H. G. Wells* 121). She leaves the convent eager to write “a tremendous novel or ‘show up’ of the Catholic Church” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 122). By 1919, though she has never yet met Wells, she has dedicated a novel to him with the inscription, “H. G. Wells. Tu nous a imposé tes songes” (“You have forced your dreams on us”) (Wells *H. G. Wells* 123). The Catholic satirist in this story does not, like Chesterton, write a withering attack on Wells’s account of human origins and mock at his Utopias; rather, within a three year period, she loses her faith in the Church’s origin story, becomes a bitter enemy of organized religion, and declares herself to be one of Wells’s dreams. Soon, she will tell Wells that he is “the hero of her life” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 123). A potential enemy has become a mouthpiece; Wells now has a Chesterton who loves him.

Keun appeals to Wells precisely as a formerly Catholic writer who has surrendered her agency to him; initially, she speaks only when Wells wishes her to speak and says only what he would have her say. She is to be his sexually active nun, believing his doctrines and following his will as ardently as she once believed and followed the Catholic Church. On their first encounter, Keun treats Wells as an object of “adoration,” declaring that she wants “to give her whole life to [him],” that she wants “nothing but to be of service to [him]” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 125). Wells accepts her as a lover only because she has made this vow of obedience to him (he calls it her “protestation”): “‘If you feel like that.,’ said I . . . .” (*H. G. Wells* 125, ellipses Wells’s). To ensure that all agency remains in his hands, Wells sets some rather severe terms for their relationship. Keun is to stay at a chateau he sets up for her in rural France. She is not to write Wells when he is away (which will most often be the case), and she must never, for any reason,
set foot in the English-speaking world (Wells *H. G. Wells* 125). If Keun was figuratively written by Wells before, she is almost literally written by him now, as in her isolation she tailors her personality according to “the sort of effects [he] would tolerate” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 149). She also begins to write exactly what Wells would have her write, the satire of the Catholic Church that she has long intended, but never executed (Wells *H. G. Wells* 126). At this point, Wells remarks, “I was as nearly in love with her as I ever became” (*H. G. Wells* 126).

Keun, as Wells depicts her in the early stages of their relationship, is the perfect Lover-Shadow, creating herself according to his desires and affirming and embodying his every idea. Since Keun functions as a metaphor for Chesterton and his Church, her willingness to play the part and speak the lines assigned to her by Wells promises that the Catholic threat to his authority will be removed, the world will submit to his remaking, and the Wellsian future will come to be. As Wells’s language suggests, she is his oeuvre. In the *Experiment*, Wells describes much of his work as being “as white and pasty as a starch-fed nun” (5). In *Wells in Love*, Keun is depicted as a literalized version of this metaphor. In fact, she becomes “so pallidly fat” from “the convent fare” that after reentering the secular world she does not “know herself” in a mirror (Wells *H. G. Wells* 121). In Bakhtin’s terms, Keun is an illustration of monoglossia; she is a second speaker who in no ways functions as a second voice in the text, but simply affirms the text’s dominant (Wellsian) language.

This fantasy of Keun as a book written by Wells ultimately turns to nightmare, however. Wells’s metaphor of book-as-nun does, after all, describe works he wishes that he had never written but cannot entirely disavow. In her isolation in rural France, Keun adapts her persona to Wells’s wishes because he “[i]s her only audience and [he] [i]s a very restraining audience” (Wells *H. G. Wells* 128). As Wells recollects, “She played to me to be effective to me” (*H. G. Wells* 149). However, since Keun’s identity is derived
from her audience’s responses to her actions, as she comes into contact with audiences other than Wells, her behavior changes radically. Wells asserts that he “could trace . . . with every enlargement of a circle of acquaintance . . . the gradual return of Odette from her original abjection [to Wells] to a state of . . . egotistical assertion” (H. G. Wells 128). The relationship soon becomes a horror to them both, and their constant fights are quite exactly over who gets to talk. Keun wants Wells to become her “protective, sustaining, responsive, understanding Lover-Shadow” and complains that he does not “suppor[t]” her or function as her “protector” when she talks to their guests (Wells H. G. Wells 128-29). What Wells desires of Keun is much simpler: “‘Oh God,’ I would cry, shut up” (Wells H. G. Wells 129, emphasis Wells’s). If Wells is to recreate the world as he intends, he requires as his audience the Lover-Shadow, an audience that does not talk on its own initiative and talks to him only to affirm his thoughts, and he becomes deeply frustrated as Keun ceases to embody this audience.28

As Keun’s behavior becomes more hostile, self-assertive, and, at times, simply bizarre, she changes from an infinitely pliable audience on whom Wells’s desires are written to a parody of such an audience. She switches from an illustration of monoglossia to an illustration of mimicry. As her ego increases, Keun determines that, regardless of the means employed, she will become the center of attention at Wells’s social gatherings. Interrupting upper-class English dinner conversation with a string of profanities is a quick, if distasteful, way to get attention, and she soon becomes addicted to such behavior (Wells H. G. Wells 134). She also exploits her status as a non-native speaker of English. When Keun has horribly offended their guests with her profanities, Wells will “see her long hands gesticulating down the table towards [him]. ‘I learnt it all from that man,’ she [will] cry. ‘Every word I know—I got from him’” (Wells H. G. Wells 134). Keun is now a nightmare of reception, a text that constantly generates meanings adverse to authorial intention; her irruptions of profanity disrupt and discredit
her author and his attempt to impose meaning on the world. Her insistence that Wells has authored her has turned parodic; as in Homi Bhabha’s definition of mimicry, Keun’s apparent repetition of Wells’s own often-profane speech comprises an “excess or slippage . . . [that] becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes” Wells’s authorial “subject as a ‘partial’ [rather than full] presence” (Bhabha 86). Wells recognizes some subconscious or conscious subversion in Keun’s tendency to attach herself to totalizing authorities whom her seemingly submissive behavior ultimately discredits. As he observes, “Just as she had thought to thrust the responsibility for her conduct upon the Catholic Church, so now she turned to me . . . In form she gave; in effect she grabbed” (Wells H. G. Wells 125). Normally a bitter opponent of religion, Wells is united with the Church in his frustration with this woman whose adoration turns to mimicry; in a strange passage, he suggests that he and Christ are both ex-lovers whom Keun has misunderstood (Wells H. G. Wells 124).

Wells’s relationship with Keun finally collapses, as did his relationship with West, in a series of disputes over which of them is author and which audience. She abandons her “original pose of an intense devotion” and adopts that of the “beautiful woman with a . . . subjugated lover” (Wells H. G. Wells 146). Wells desires a relationship with her only if she continues to accept her objectified status; he “took her” only on “terms” and she has “no meaning” for him outside of these terms (H. G. Wells 136, 151). He is also exasperated, to the very end, by her failure to finish “her convent novel” attacking the Catholic Church (Wells H. G. Wells 151). Wells breaks off their relationship after she first violates their terms by coming to London and then “inflict[s] . . . disgrace upon” him in London and elsewhere by her obnoxious and irresponsible behavior (Wells H. G. Wells 150, cf. 148-49). She has failed to be the perfectly receptive audience he desires; rather, in keeping with her unconsciously parodic manner, she has behaved in such a way as to hurt Wells’s reputation and credibility by invoking her
association with him. Interestingly, a significant number of her embarrassing outbursts occur in front of prominent political figures (including, for instance, a Romanian prince and an Asquith) and a number of her embarrassing letters are addressed to prominent literary figures (including, for instance, Somerset Maugham) (Wells H. G. Wells 150, 160). Despite her initial agreement with Wells, Keun refuses to leave the “English and American worlds” of his primary readership as his “own to do as [he] pleased in”; her chaotic speech becomes another interruption of his authority over his universe of discourse (Wells H. G. Wells 151). Presumed to be his Catholic Lover-Shadow, she becomes instead another rival author, another scandal to his name, even another book he wishes he had not written.

To make matters worse, not long after their break-up, Keun published a series of articles damningly interpreting Wells’s very self for English readers. As one might expect, given the pattern I have established, Wells must recapture through interpretation and narration not just the much-rumored story of his relations with Keun, but also her own attempt to interpret him. Wells’s breakup with Keun occurred in 1933, as he was writing Experiment in Autobiography. Keun traversed the London literary world telling her story of use and abuse, and found sympathy from Lady Rhondda, the editor of the feminist magazine Time and Tide (cf. Wells Experiment 156-57). When the Experiment appeared, Time and Tide spitefully hired Keun as its reviewer for the volume, giving Wells’s jilted mistress the chance to interpret his self and work. This is a shockingly direct instance of my claim that Wells was forced to write a second autobiography due to the reviews of the first, due to the book-to-end-all-interpretation being itself interpreted.

Keun’s series of articles, collectively entitled “H. G. Wells the Player,” offer a cogent critique of the sources of Wells’s authority. Her basic criticism is twofold: one, that Wells reacts too intensely to outside stimuli to effectively synthesize all of human knowledge and, two, that he treats other people as objects and has no respect for their
agency. In a direct reversal of the *Experiment*'s argument, she describes Wells’s mind as “miraculously over-sensitized” ("Player" 1249-50). Since Wells’s mind is so dangerously receptive to external stimuli, he collects more “impressions” than he can effectively process, leading to his constant changes of idea and ideal (Keun “Player” 1249-50). Wells’s intellectual inconstancy also suggests that his Utopias are merely wish-fulfillment fantasies produced by his “outraged ego,” rather than applications of any real ideal (Keun “Player” 1250). Since Wells desires a world designed according to his wishes, the existence of other people, other human subjects, proves a problem to him. Keun complains that he sees other people only as “objects, to be annihilated if they oppos[e] to be used if they serv[e]” his ends (“Player” 1347). He possesses a “vulnerability to criticism that [i]s like a disease” (Keun “Player” 1347). To make matters worse, Keun blames Wells’s inability to recognize and appraise these aberrancies in his behavior on his lack of systematic religious training, for religion provides us with an ideal of the human spirit by which we may judge ourselves (Keun “Player” 1250).

Keun ties her charges together by asserting that Wells is, above all, a “player”; his attempt to remake the world is not a systematic crusade, but rather an ever-changing game in which people serve as counters.

Wells admitted to having read Keun’s articles, and the section devoted to their relationship in *Wells in Love* is, in part, an attempt to narrate and explain her direct assault on his self. Though *Wells in Love* does not relate the contents of Keun’s articles, it offers a narrative of Wells as a lover that corresponds with, even endorses, most of her charges against him. As always, Wells leaves the details to his opponents, and concerns himself only with interpretation. He grants her charge that he uses people as objects. I have already established that Wells is frank about his use of Keun as an object; at one point, he goes so far as to admit that he “regard[ed] Odette as . . . a prostitute-housekeeper, to put it plainly” (*H. G. Wells* 139). The majority of his relationships are no
better, as he freely confesses. “My story of my relations with women,” he writes towards the end of the volume, “Is mainly a story of greed, foolishness, and great expectation” (H. G. Wells 197). Most of the women he has “kissed, solicited, embraced, and lived with, have never entered intimately and deeply into [his] emotional life” (Wells H. G. Wells 61). This is, unfortunately, the story of the age, an age of “dislocated sexual relations” in which “trouble between modern man and woman” is “general” (Wells H. G. Wells 197).

Because this is the story of the epoch, his actions, however inconsiderate, are not unjust. If he has merely used women for his purposes, he “got nothing better than [he] gave. . . . the exchanges were fairly equal—two libertines met” (Wells H. G. Wells 61). He admits that he has behaved badly, but doubts that anything better is possible in the current world of crossed purposes and crossed desires. He is guilty of Keun’s charges because no better behavior is presently possible; since people have no idea how to treat each other, a frankness about one’s purposes is the best one can do. He is an instance of the emotional dislocation caused by the modern era. As always, Wells grants the particular and shifts the outline in which it is placed.

The one specific charge that Wells cannot grant is that his mind is “over-sensitized” and responds too readily to “impressions.” Since to respond intensely to (but not successfully interpret) stimuli is the role of the literati in the Wellsian schema, and to synthesize (but not directly apprehend) information culled from stimuli is the role of the sage, this charge, if true, would discredit Wells’s idea of himself as a modern sage, a specialist in generalization. Wells defends himself against Keun’s charges by dividing them. He has throughout the text asserted that Keun’s speech is babbling and irrational when she is not simply repeating his words under his command; correspondingly, he splits her two connected charges into a self-contradiction. Wells argues, in sum, that his tendency to treat people as objects proves that he is not overly influenced by and does not particularly care about what goes on outside him.
Wells illustrates his lack of sensitivity to external sensation by describing his response to women in general, to Keun in particular, and to Keun’s articles attacking him. Wells’s response to women in general I have already discussed; even his lovers usually fail to penetrate into his “emotional life.” Towards Keun, he is even more unfeeling. When she undergoes minor surgery, Wells’s inability to “feel a spark of distress” on her account causes her to “rave” about his “callousness” (Wells H. G. Wells 138). Shortly thereafter, Keun has an affair with her surgeon, and is so emotionally scarred by it that she buys a gun, explicitly intending to kill him and, implicitly, perhaps herself (her “life” has been “spoilt,” she insists) (Wells H. G. Wells 139). Even this soap opera elicits no response from Wells. He is “bored” by the story of her affair and “never bother[s] to take [her gun] away from her” for “Odette is not the stuff to shoot” (Wells H. G. Wells 138-139). Wells similarly stresses the failure of Keun’s verbal and written attacks to elicit a reaction from him. After their break-up, she feels “a necessity to scream at [Wells]; to libel, to expose, to hurl missiles, to worry [him] and hurt [him]” and cannot understand that he does “not care a rap” what she says, does, or publicly reveals (Wells H. G. Wells 156-7). Her articles against him strike him only as “very silly,” so devoid of real bite that he wonders whether the editor removed the more interesting material from them out of fear of libel (Wells H. G. Wells 157). He concludes that, “For all her spasmodic efforts to do so, she never really hurt me” (H. G. Wells 116). Wells’s description of his behavior after their break-up summarizes his general apathy towards Keun: he was “not only invisible but deaf and blind to her. [He] was not reacting to her” (H. G. Wells 156). Wells is completely unresponsive to external stimuli and simply will not accept the role of the audience; he is no modernist and will be no one’s Lover Shadow. He insists that he deals in generalities and avoids particulars, and that he is entirely an author and never an audience, thereby preserving the possibility of his sage project as he formulates it. Again, Wells has rebuilt his self and restored his interpretive authority after a trauma.
related to textual reception by narrating this very trauma and, rather than denying its scandalous details, embedding them in a wider outline. Despite the extremity of the situation, Wells’s indifference to Keun finally serves merely as a vividly concrete illustration of his indifference to particulars, and as a means of tying another love affair with a rival author back into the interpretive web he initially created in the *Experiment*. Again, the only damage to his authority that Wells cannot recoup is that his enemies do not ultimately remain his ideal audience (or “Lover-Shadow”); he can interpret the Catholic Church, as it is embodied in Odette Keun, but he cannot get it to listen to him or obey him. The Catholic Church still stands between him and the earthly paradise he imagines.

This is the basic, rather cyclical pattern on which the narrative rhetoric of *Wells in Love* is founded—Wells’s unified interpretation of his self and his world is interrupted by a rival who produces a resistant reading of his works, Wells seduces a surrogate for this rival to show his dominance over even his rival’s audience, and then this surrogate becomes herself a rival author whose discordant critiques must be narrated, interpreted, and captured into Wells’s larger pattern. In a scene intended for publication by Wells but deleted by his posthumous editor, we see a fantasy version of this pattern, emphasizing Wells’s dominance but eliminating the recursivity that undermines it. At the Hermitage Hotel on the French Riviera, Wells meets Constance Coolidge, a young American widow with a colorful and checkered past and close connections to the modernists (cf. Wells *H. G. Wells* 191). “In Paris she had seen a good lot of the world of literary eccentrics, poets and writers, who centred around Joyce, Lawrence and the like” and she had been the mistress of the minor modernist poet Harry Crosby (Wells ms. A-241). Crosby had idealized suicide as “the sharpest point of wilful living” and had suggested that they “commi[t] suicide together” (Wells ms. A-241-42). When Coolidge declined, he enacted a murder/suicide with another girl in New York (Wells ms. 242). Coolidge emerges from
this experience traumatized, “puzzled . . . and rather anxious to discuss it all with anyone
intelligent who might be able to proffer some sort of explanation of what she was about
and what the world was up to” (Wells ms. 242). Wells has read Crosby and can interpret
his suicide for her; Crosby was, he tells her, “a sort of embodiment of the insatiable
desire for the splendid life that troubles so many of us” (Wells ms. 242). His suicide is a
symbol of the age. After, on his first date with Coolidge, Wells has interpreted Crosby’s
suicide for her and has “atomized a volume of T. S. Eliot’s poems” with her, she sleeps
with Wells and becomes his mistress (Wells H. G. Wells 191). In this fantasy of
absolute interpretive power, Wells seduces a lover of the modernists by interpreting their
works for her. All interpretation rests in the hands of Wells: the modernist author is dead
and cannot counter Wells’s interpretation of his work and the mistress has literary
associations but no thought of publication. Benjamin suggests that only corpses—rather
than living people—are passive enough to submit entirely to the author’s wishes, signify
only what the author would have them signify, and thereby “enter into the homeland of
allegory,” where everything means what the author would have it mean (217); similarly,
Wells’s strategies for recouping his total interpretive authority work only when his rival
enters the text as a corpse. The work that Wells interprets most effectively is Crosby’s
suicide note.

This one small exception aside, the problem of audience that Wells set out to
analyze and to correct in Wells in Love remains as the volume closes. Though he can,
through much finesse, interpret West and Keun, they no longer comprise his audience,
and certainly not his Lover-Shadow. He still lacks the enormous and infinitely
submissive audience he needs to remake the chaotic present world into the future world
he alone envisions and understands. Towards the end of the volume, Wells recognizes
this problem. His self-appointed persona as creator of the future world places
requirements on his corresponding Lover-Shadow that no actual person can fulfill. The
audience he needs simply does not exist. As he acknowledges, his “own unreasonable monstrous demands for a Lover-Shadow [are] based on the exacting enormity of the persona [he has] devised for [him]self” (H. G. Wells 197). “I am,” he continues, “an insufficient and often irritable ‘great man’ with an infantile craving for help” (H. G. Wells 197). He desires, he realizes, no actual audience and no actual lover, but “the Lover-Shadow of my persona,” a being made partly from “fantasy” (Wells H. G. Wells 200). Consequently, he demands the impossible from his real lovers. He mourns that of his lovers “in my last phase as . . . in my first, I asked impossible things” (Wells H. G. Wells 197-98).

As the final pages of the book approach, Wells seems to despair even of his scheme of creating a planned world. Wells has had his hopes for the future, but his actual life has only acutely embodied the trauma of the modern. He is traumatized by every significant reminder of the external “lie of a world” that he cannot control. These attacks are usually brought on when his “Lover-Shadow has dispersed again,” when his hope in his ideal audience becoming actual has become thin (Wells H. G. Wells 201). He writes, “In my less protected moments I do think quite deliberately of self-destruction . . . by open, deliberate suicide, which would be a frank confession that life has been too much for me; that it is not good enough and that I am beaten, and I and my universe a failure” (H. G. Wells 202, emphasis mine). Wells knows that his universe does not exist; the present world, a “lying” “foul” “tangle,” is his “inescapable background” (H. G. Wells 226). In these bleak periods, he continues living only out of concern for his “disciples” who would not know what to “make of such a suicide” (Wells H. G. Wells 203). If Wells were to “go wilfully”, as he observes, it would “leave a nasty sudden hole under their feet—I do not like to think of them staring down into such a chasm” (H. G. Wells 203). Since a meaningful universe exists at present only in Wells’s imagination and can exist in the future only if Wells’s influence spreads, his despairing death would shatter the
meaningful universe he has longed for all his life. His disciples would find the meaningful future world in hope of which they have lived broken apart; they would be forced to admit that they live in a meaningless, fragmented word; they would, in short, be forced to become modernists. And so, to forestall the triumph of modernism, and to preserve his particular version of the sage discourse, Wells lives on.

I seem to have worked through a labyrinth of interpretation and reinterpretation only to find Wells finally confessing what nearly every intellectual in the 1930s and 1940s asserted: there is no master interpretation of the world, there is no inspired hermeneutic that can account for all reality, the sage project is dead. Wells’s second autobiography seems to admit that it cannot succeed in its quest to recapture all interpretations and restore the integrity of his self and world. The theories of the Lover-Shadow and the specialist sage have just been interesting delays on the way to these inevitable modernist conclusions. But this is not quite the case. The ambiguity and recursivity that have marked Wells’s final autobiography carry through to its conclusion. *Wells in Love* is a designedly posthumous autobiography; quite intentionally and quite exactly, it *must* be read by a future audience. Whether the book will be disdained or will, impossibly, remake the world entirely depends on what this future audience is like. The self-effacement and submission that present audiences refuse to grant Wells, future audiences may grant. Wells has made his final appeal to the future to restore the coherence of his self and world. Since he rejects all notion of historical inevitability, he cannot, however, decide what this audience will be like; *Wells in Love* worries about its own reception to a degree unusual in a posthumous autobiography. The full effect is clearest when the drafts of the book are considered as well as the final copy.

The text of *Wells in Love* seems to end with Wells imagining a modernist audience that disdains his work. Despairsing, he lies with his “face to the wall” and gives up his war with his critics. Regarding his most recent book, he says to all resistant
readers, “If you cannot understand it, read it or quibble away from it, but anyhow do not pester me . . . . Anything you do or say I shall disregard entirely . . . you will never get nearer to me now than the waste-paper basket” (*H. G. Wells* 230). He has closed himself off from the world and has ceased to attempt to embody his Lover-Shadow in the actual audience. Having given up on his present audience, he begins to despair of the future. He pessimistically wonders whether “sufficient interest in [his] life will survive” to justify the publication of *Wells in Love* (234). Continuing in this vein, he guesses (rightly) that “the world will [n]ever stand a complete posthumous edition of [his] works” (*Wells* *H. G. Wells* 235). This ending, in which Wells accepts that his critics will never listen and the future will not care, is the standard ending of *Wells in Love*. The editor of the volume remarks that “effectively it ends with the waste-paper basket” (*H. G. Wells* 18-19). In this ending, the contemptuous modernists rule the future and no one cares to read Wells anymore.

However, the book actually closes with Wells imagining a future audience that lives in the World State. This audience has literally been created by Wells’s works and alone can properly appreciate him. Wells reminds us once again that his life has been lived in service of the “creative World-State” (*H. G. Wells* 235). It is, in fact, to the World State and not the present that Wells belongs. He is “an early World-Man” and “live[s] in exile from the world community of [his] desires” (*Wells* *H. G. Wells* 235). He can belong and be understood only in the future world his works may create. He ends with this benediction: “I salute that finer larger world . . . and maybe ever again someone down the vista, some lingering vestige of my Lover-Shadow, may look back and appreciate an ancestral salutation” (*Wells* *H. G. Wells* 235). Here, the future audience is his Lover Shadow, is the receptive audience infinitely pliable to his desires, is, even, his descendant, and, far from ignoring him and his work, obligingly does what he suggests. It looks back and watches him wave. If only in the realm of science fiction and bare
possibility, Wells receives an audience willing to “obliterate its own existence” and entirely efface its self, the audience he needs if he is to successfully narrate his story of traumatic reception and restore the unity of his world (cf. Laub 63). This scant hope sustains the narrative into its final sentences. 31

In the B typescript, one of the manuscripts from which the printed text of *H. G. Wells in Love* was compiled, a further ending is appended, which imagines yet another future audience for the work. In this manuscript, the book ends with Wells discussing “posthumous fate” of Anatole France, his close friend and fellow skeptic. In language that recalls Freud’s discussion of trauma, Wells writes of how his “barriers” against the outside world have been breached by hearing about the blows his friend’s reputation has recently sustained. France’s death, Wells writes, “was the signal for a perfect mud volcano of abuse and detraction by novelists and by the Catholic youth of France. Maybe that will happen to me” (Wells ms. B-317). In Wells’s other works from the 1940s, as we have seen, he imagines a Catholic future world; in this alternate ending, he worries about his inevitably negative reception in that world, a world that stubbornly refuses to be remade.

In Wells’s autobiographical writings, the basic threats to his authority, modernism and Catholicism, James and Chesterton, are never fully captured through narration, but their victory is never confirmed. Perhaps modernists and Catholics will rule the future world and Wells’s works will never have their intended effect; perhaps the fragmented present will continue or the meaningless past will revivify. But perhaps Wells’s apocalyptically-imagined audience, the future Lover-Shadow, will arise, finally read his books as they should be read, and fulfill his prophecies. One simply can never know. Wells’s sage work typically cedes the authority to interpret the present, but demands authority over and undertakes engagement with the present audience. Wells’s self and world are always depicted as about to be unified in a future that never quite comes, but
Wells requires the consent of the present audience to validate these artificial constructions and make them real; his intertextual engagement with his audience and critics, past and present, prevent his works from simply being science fiction. The trauma of reception—a reminder that the sage cannot create or control his audience, but that this audience reads and interprets him—became for Wells an obsession that haunts his autobiographies. Wells’s refusal, against his inclinations, to simply withdraw into the orderly “parallel universe” of high art or of his own imaginings give his nonfictional prose its rich complexity (cf. Trotter 20). But by the end of the great tactical withdrawal that is *Wells in Love*, Wells’s deferral of the world of the sage into the world of the future has also become a deferral of the audience of the sage into the audience of the future.

The sage discourse that began with Carlyle’s revision of Romanticism has, in the hands of its most scientific practitioner, come full circle; Wells has finally rejected the complicated engagement with the recalcitrant phenomenon of actual readers that mark the sages’ attempt to interpret the world and has instead, like the major Romantic poets, come to imagine his Utopian works as read by a Utopian audience living in a Utopian world. In Wells’s final autobiography, the sage, like King Arthur or Frazer’s Fisher King, passes into a state of suspended animation, in which he awaits the coming of that future world where, just possibly, his wounds will be healed and his kingdom restored.

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1 In *Anticipations*, his first book of nonfiction prophecy, Wells defines “modern prophecy” as “a branch of speculation” that “should follow with all decorum the scientific method” (*Anticipations* 4). The importance of *Anticipations* (1901) to Wells’s career as a prophet can hardly be overestimated. *Anticipations*, his first mass market nonfiction book, predicted the course of the coming century to wide public interest and acclaim, requiring eight printings its first year, and winning Wells a following of young intellectuals (David Smith 42-45). The work sets the frame for much of Wells’s later prophecy, and in his own estimation forms “the keystone to the main arch of [his] work” (*Experiment* 549).

2 See, for example, Judith Ryan’s assertion that by the 1890s “a single, consistent point of view no longer appeared a faithful way of representing reality” (19) and Michael Bell’s sum-up that early twentieth-century modernism’s “intellectual formation encompassed a coming to terms with the lines of thought associated with Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche” (9).

3 See especially Chapter One.
In this, Wells’s sage work accords exactly with Jameson’s theory that science fiction arose when the present moment became “unavailable to us for contemplation in its own right,” “untotable and hence unimaginable.” The function of science fiction, according to Jameson, is to remove the horror and uninterpretability of the present by casting it as “some future world’s remote past, as if posthumous and collectively remembered” (152-53). However, in his sense that the universe not only presently has no meaning, but has never possessed meaning, Wells passes significantly closer to nihilism than does science fiction as Jameson formulates it. For this reason, though Wells restores meaning by using some of the narrative tactics commonly employed in science fiction, his rhetoric, while not contradictory to Jameson’s model, is considerably more complicated than this model would suggest, being (as we shall see) invested as much in a certain construction of antiquity as in a certain construction of the future.

See also Patrick Parrinder’s comment that Wells saw the scientific method less as a means of obtaining reliable information than “as a progressive, subversive, and destabilizing” ideal (137).


William James admired Wells’s thought on this subject, finding it akin to his own pragmatism.

On humanity’s capacity for self-selection, see Parrinder 63. Parrinder’s Shadows of the Future is probably also the best single analysis of Wells’s use of the future in his thought and work.

The method to be employed in service of the goal of eugenics varies in Wells’s work; the fact of eugenics and the basic aim of eugenics do not. Wells initially called for what was dubbed “positive eugenics,” deliberate human self-selection and breeding. He eventually became convinced that we did not know enough about genetics for positive self-selection, and so turned his focus towards what was dubbed “negative eugenics,” the sterilization of the weak or unfit (cf. Wells Open Conspiracy 35-36).

See also Experiment in Autobiography, pg. 641 on the necessary role of disaster in bringing about a fundamental change in the world order.

On Wells’s admiration for the Gnostics in general and the Manichees in particular, see Glover 125 and Wells ‘42 14.

On the role of the literary men, see Wells’s designation of “literature” as “education,” insistence that the need for a “world commonwealth” should be “the dominant theme in modern education,” and his famous dictum that humanity is in a race “between education and catastrophe” (qtd. in Wagar 121, 124). Hence, literature must educate the public about Wells’s ideas if the world is to avoid catastrophe.

Wells’s debt on this matter to Sigmund Freud and less famous figures such as J. J. Atkinson and Grant Allen was open and acknowledged.

The influence of Jung’s conception of the persona on Wells’s conception of the persona was openly acknowledged by Wells himself (Experiment 9).

See Wells’s despairing comments about how “men of science or literary and artistic men” seem to be incapable of uniting, a situation that leads to the “extreme moral disintegration which is . . . the normal state of the ‘republics’ of science and art and letters” (“The Case” 206). He suggests that this division helped fuel World War I and that it is preventing any philosopher-king from arising (Wells “The Case” 204-6).

For Wells’s connection of this fear to Catholicism, see Belloq Objects, pg. 80, where he identifies the fixity and permanance of the present type of humanity as the essence of the Catholic system.

See also Ezra Pound’s insistence that any element of rhetoric in literature, any attempt to deliberately persuade the reader is inadmissible, because rhetoric caused the war (Pound 308, cf. Sherry Ezra 4, 17, 53-54).

Some Chestertonians have somewhat misleadingly argued that The Everlasting Man met with a poor reception, and even that Belloq’s attack did Wells more damage. The originator of this argument seems to be the generally well-informed John Sullivan, who says that The Everlasting Man had “a first printing of 3000 copies, a later issue in the cheap People’s Library and thereafter was out of print from many years” (63). The facts of the matter are that Belloq’s attack on Wells was printed on a small Catholic press and sold only to the Catholic community and that Wells’s reply to Belloq was printed on a small Rationalist press and sold only to a small group of militant atheists (cf. Sullivan 59). As Wells’s most thorough biographers conclude concerning the controversy, “it is very doubtful whether either of them [Belloq and Wells] carried conviction beyond those who were already committed one way or the other” (Mackenzie 348). By contrast, Chesterton’s reply to Wells, The Everlasting Man, was printed on the mainstream press.
Dodd, Mead, and Company and went through six printings in its first six months of release (Chesterton *Everlasting*) 4). Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and C. S. Lewis (none of whom shared Chesterton’s religious affiliation at the time of the book’s publication) have all written of the work’s influence on them, and it has remained in print almost continuously since its release. I think that Sullivan concludes as he does because he bases his data only off of British sales figures. Like the *Outline of History* itself, *The Everlasting Man* proved to be a much bigger hit (a perennial hit, in fact) in America than in Britain. 19 Benjamin describes the allegorist (the ultimate type of the writer who imposes a coherent meaning on every object) as exercising an “arbitrary rule of a realm of dead objects” (232). When a character (most often the devil), talks back at the allegorist and questions the allegorist’s interpretations, the coherence of the genre is undone, and totalizing interpretations of the universe are interrupted by the “laughter of hell” (Benjamin 227).

20 Given Wells’s general support for the professional classes, this admission is perhaps as personally necessary as it is logically surprising.

21 Implicitly, this logic bans his readers from interpreting the text. If readers deconstruct, they are looking too close and failing to see the outline. If they skim for a loose overview, it is not clear from what position other than the authorial that this overview could properly be seen. Judith Ryan’s observation that pointillism is “paradoxical” due to its “extreme subjectivity” and simultaneous “eradication of any clear point of view” also applies to Wells’s use of pointillist imagery (19).

22 On Wells’s identification of “the Novel” (so capitalized) with modernism and its canons of criticism, see his essay “The Novel of Ideas,” pg. 216.

23 Wells’s treatment of his controversy with James can be interestingly contextualized in light of Julia Kristeva’s model of intertextuality. Kristeva has argued that intertextuality proper invariably destabilizes the meaning of a text. In Kristeva’s schema, a text that bears some marks of intertextuality, but actually resolves its competing voices into a single, coherent meaning, is not actually intertextual at all, but is, rather, an example of Hegelian dialectic, as it ultimately forms a new master language out of its competing languages. Wells’s synthesis of competing theories of the novel striking recalls Kristeva’s ideas.

24 Cf. Kristeva’s distinction between “dialogism,” in which texts argue, collide and blend in a chaos devoid of resolution and “dialectics,” which are “based on a triad and thus on struggle and projection (a moment of transcendence)” (“Word” 88). Wells’s texts, as he begins to write autobiographically, are participating in a dialogic situation; the purpose of the autobiographies is to restore the dialectic.

25 For this reason, I will not often employ the term “homosociality” in my argument.

26 Shelley writes that when we fall in love, we are seeking, “a soul within our soul,” the “antitype” of our soul, a soul that will “vibrate with the vibrations of our own,” a remark that certainly prefigures Wells’s Lover-Shadow (303). Shelley’s idea may have influenced Wells, as he indicates that his thoughts on love and sex were influenced by Shelley, though he does not specify exactly in what way (H. G. Wells, 26-27, 60). Wells’s obsession with audience can also be meaningfully understood in the terms of Trotter’s study, which observes that “recognition is a particular problem, sometimes leading to madness, for those who depend on their expertise, and on the symbolic capital it at once accumulates and relies upon for its furtherance, to make a living” (43). As the only professional-class sage, Wells needs the public to accept the legitimacy of his self-created profession of professional generalist; with the sole exception of the favorable reception of the *Outline of History*, the reading public plainly did not do so.

27 In early twentieth-century psychology, schizophrenia was defined as a “loss of inner unity” evidenced by pointless and repetitive imitations of others’ behavior (Trotter 32). Trotter argues that paranoia was a more respectable illness for a professional to have, as paranoia involves the interpretation, rather than the imitation, of external stimuli. The paranoiac is a subject; the schizophrenic is an object.

28 Many critics—see, for instance, Glover 132 and Ross 108—have suggested that Wells’s view of the world is implicitly totalitarian, and one is strongly reminded of this critique here.

29 Keun’s other writings after her break-up with Wells also evidence a melancholy nostalgia for the religion she has rejected. She claims to have gained in the convent an “intuition . . . of the mystical life” and asserts that “a longing for those [mystic] horizons, which [she] afterwards lost . . . will accompany [her] to [her] grave. Nothing has replaced, nor will replace until [she] die[s], the radiance and peace of those incommunicable intimations” (America 241). Despite Wells’s efforts, the Church is irreplaceable.
Wells’s seduction of Constance Coolidge appears in the published version of *H. G. Wells in Love*, but the information about Harry Crosby is suppressed. The page numbers vary wildly in my citations because I refer to the published text rather than the unpublished manuscript whenever possible.

This element of Wells’s audience dynamic accords with William Schieck’s theory that Wells’s last novels are “framed for a Utopian audience” (*Splintering* 44).

The collapse of Wells’s science of prophecy into Romanticism is less ironic than it might seem (or perhaps a double irony) if one considers Robert Kaufman’s assertion that Shelley’s prophetic claims for poetry are influenced in repressed but clearly discernible ways by the writings of the rationalistic “Enlightenment calculators” whom Wells so admired (720).
CHAPTER 5

“AS ANY DETECTIVE STORY SHOULD END”:

HOW CHESTERTON’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY SAVES THE SAGE DISCOURSE FROM SHAVIANISM, MODERNISM, AND MURDER

I: Catholicism Versus Impressionism: G. K. Chesterton’s Metaphysical Populism

If Thomas Carlyle’s vision of a society ruled by an elite cordon of heroes who restore meaning and value to the universe finds an exaggerated Edwardian successor in H. G. Wells’s vision of a World State ruled by an Open Conspiracy that literally creates the meaning and value of the universe, John Henry Newman’s deeply existential Catholicism finds its exaggerated Edwardian successor in G. K Chesterton’s philosophy, which holds the existence of Chesterton himself to be uncertain but the validity of collective tradition to be sure. Chesterton’s fifty-odd work oeuvre represents a consistent and coherent effort to restore meaning to the world following the nihilism that dominated British literary and artistic culture in the 1890s, and for large sections of conservative Catholicism, Chesterton’s apologetic for a unitary world-view stressing tradition, the unchanging character of human nature, and the collective wisdom of the masses still possesses a near-prophetic authority. For this group, Chesterton remains “a prophet in an age of false prophets,” as Fr. Ronald Knox, British Catholicism’s most prominent public orator of the inter-war period, dubbed him (qtd. in Pearce viii).
For the first half of Chesterton’s career, his influence reached far beyond the Catholic or Anglo-Catholic pale to influence the whole of his culture; like Newman, he was a confrontational prophet of an original and idiosyncratic vision of reality, not just the house apologist of the British Catholic Church. Many of his contemporaries considered him to be “the greatest prophet of our generation . . . a prophet . . . larger in every way than Mr. Shaw or Mr. Wells” (qtd. in Slosson 129). Even his common nickname, “The Sage of Beaconsfield,” implies a comparison to Carlyle, “The Sage of Chelsea” (cf. Ffinch 174).1 Perhaps most tellingly, the rising modernists, eager to overturn both Chesterton’s style and ideology, attacked him on the same grounds as others praised him; T. S. Eliot scorned him precisely as “an inheritor of the older generation of Victorian Prophets” (Rev. of Outline 71). Chesterton’s loss of critical reputation, which occurred during the modernist-dominated 1920s and which has yet to be entirely reversed, and his loss, during the same period, of a significant portion of his audience cause many critics, and I dare say most readers, to imagine Chesterton simply as a Catholic apologist rather than as a controversial sage akin to Carlyle or Newman. The central contention of this chapter is that in his Autobiography, finished just weeks before his death in 1936, Chesterton attempts to address this problem himself. In his autobiography, Chesterton makes a complicated play to restore his authority to speak as a sage to the culture as a whole, and finds that he cannot do so without addressing and accounting for his decline in literary reputation. He must address particularly the damage inflicted upon his authority by George Bernard Shaw, who argued that Chesterton was either utterly individual and therefore unrepresentative of the populace or utterly derivative and therefore of little intellectual merit, and by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound,
who granted that Chesterton represented the populace but did not consider the populace to be a valid source of authority of any kind. To deal with these attacks, Chesterton’s autobiography narrates himself as a man unusual among intellectuals in that he has acknowledged his ties to and dependence on the rest of humanity. He accepts the populace’s somewhat dismissive ultimate judgment of himself, that he is merely a beloved detective story writer, but reverses the values ascribed to this judgment, by investing the detective story with metaphysical weight and transferring, towards the end of his autobiography, his prophetic authority to Father Brown, his most famous creation in that genre. Like Wells, Chesterton ultimately depends on genre fiction to do the work of the sage discourse, but this move possesses a certain measure of philosophical consistency, since for the deeply populist Chesterton, popular stories are always true.

However, if we are to understand why Chesterton in his autobiography faces these particular threats to authority and why he attempts to overcome them in this particular manner, we must first analyze the philosophical system on which his authority is predicated to see how this system works and where it is vulnerable to outside attack. Like Wells, Chesterton had originally been an advocate of the nihilism he came to combat, and predicated his attempt to restore meaning to the universe on a fundamentally skeptical epistemology. Like Wells, Chesterton attempted in an intellectual world dominated by “Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche” —the very intellectual climate alleged by some writers on the sage discourse to signal the inevitable end of this discourse—to restore a unified meaning to the world (cf. Bell 9-10). In the very intellectual climate where, as I have discussed with regard to H. G. Wells, the skepticism of Nietzsche and the specialism of the efficiency men and (increasingly) the professional academics
coalesced to render any unitary system of meaning suspect. Chesterton, however, loudly cast himself as the “laughing prophet” who would reverse the intellectual trends of the age. Chesterton’s skepticism was more Wildean than Huxleyan, and assumed primarily the impossibility of knowing anything with certainty.

Chesterton had an unusually intense vision of the uncertainty of all human thought and belief. In his college years, as he recounts in his autobiography, this agnosticism towards all forms of thought collapsed into profoundly isolating solipsism, and he nearly committed suicide. During this period, he was an art student at London’s prestigious Slade School, and his turn towards nihilism was deeply influenced by the technique and philosophy of impressionist painting. In his *Autobiography*, his most extended account of his college years, he condemns impressionism as a “negative and even nihilist philosophy” (93-94). Since impressionism as an artistic movement seems harmless enough now, this conclusion may require some explanation.

Impressionism as a method of painting was derived in part from a scientific critique of human perception. Realist painting, though it presumed a given point-of-view, was thought by the impressionists to evade certain difficulties of perception (cf. Barasch 13). The impressionists stressed that humans never view an object directly, but “see” only mental patterns or images derived from reformulating and rearranging the impulses certain nerves have had in response to certain types of light (cf. Barash 38). One “sees,” essentially, only the play of light off objects, as recast by one’s own mind, never an object as such (cf. Barash 38). The impressionists claimed that their method of painting flickering, evanescent, and even distorted impressions of an object was, therefore, more truly realistic than realism's method of painting solid, stable and seemingly three-
dimensional objects (cf. Barash 26, 38). As Chesterton recounts, Impressionism's “principle was that if all that could be seen of a cow was a white line and purple shadow, we should only render the line and the shadow; in a sense we should only believe in the line and the shadow, rather than in the cow” (Autobiography 94). Even more than Pater, Chesterton saw a deep “skepticism” in this stress on perception and consequent dismissal of the object perceived; it seemed to imply “things only exist as we perceive them, or . . . [perhaps] things do not exist at all” (Autobiography 94, 95). This uncertainty about the existence of external objects was no mere mental exercise for Chesterton; he relates that during art school he came to wonder “if everything might be a dream,” and feared he was “going mad” (Autobiography 95).

Chesterton saw as implicit in impressionism the break-up of the traditional understanding of the universe as solid and coherent that later became explicit in post-impressionism. As Chesterton realized, if our world is so insolid that it breaks down and reforms whenever light shifts, our world is subject to fragmentation and is in no sense a finality. The art historian Moshe Barasch observes that during the impressionist era “the solid world, made of a tangible material substance, seemed to crumble, to slip away, or simply to disintegrate” (13). In similar terms, Chesterton asserts that impressionism is “another name for that final skepticism which can find no floor to the universe” (Man 119-20). As The Man Who Was Thursday graphically depicts, the most troubling thing about the tenet that only one's impressions exist is that it is irrefutable; there is no way of escaping one's impressions to appeal to another standard. Though he never “accepted it altogether,” Impressionism greatly influenced Chesterton's thought and mental landscape (Autobiography 94). The TLS review of Chesterton’s Autobiography did not exaggerate
when it said that for Chesterton doubt threatened to “crumble” the very “houses and hills” (541); his universe is not one that inherently holds together. Long before the modernists, Chesterton lived in a world that was dissolving and breaking up.

Although some of his admirers would insist otherwise, the literary Chesterton, widely considered an optimist, never renounced or even suppressed the disturbing ideas of his youth. Throughout his career, he asserted that, due to the subjective position of the human observer, nothing in the world was certain and no attempt to establish a purely objective or scientific explanation of reality could succeed. Mostly simply and devastatingly, he posits that reason, like perception, cannot establish its own validity with regards to the external, material world. Chesterton holds that to prove the validity of reason by rational means is to commit the logical fallacy of circular reasoning; to prove the validity of reason by any other means is irrational. Consequently, reason is a “metho[d] of proof which cannot [itself] be proved” (Chesterton *Orthodoxy* 34). While Chesterton, like Newman, does not deny the validity of reason—for Chesterton, reason is a legitimate, if limited, means of knowing—he does, like Newman, deny that reason constitutes a self-evident foundation for human thought and that rationalism constitutes a sufficient means of understanding the universe. He argues that no rationalist Master Narrative can account for the whole of life, for much of life is not rational, and is neither conducted nor designed according to rationalistic premises (cf. Lauer 21, *Charles* 203). As he writes, “Rationalism” attempts to tailor theories to fit the world, but “The World is such a curiously shaped old gentleman” that these theories “do not fit”; they “have an extraordinary way of leaving parts of him out,” (Chesterton “Thomas Carlyle” 21).³ In
other words, rationalistic systems can gain internal coherence only by repressing much of human thought and experience.\(^4\)

While Chesterton’s critique of reason and rationalism is surprisingly skeptical, he considers scientific empiricism to provide, if anything, a less persuasive account of reality than abstract reasoning. In part, Chesterton’s critique of empiricism extends from his critique of rationalism. Like H. G. Wells, and unlike the more simplistic scientific popularizers, Chesterton realizes that the empirical facts of science possess no inherent meaning.\(^5\) The everlasting feuds between competing schools of historical and scientific interpretation over the same factual terrain serve as evidence that empirical facts do not inherently mean any one thing; instead, empirical facts acquire meaning when they are arranged—either as one of many initial premises or as one of many pieces of evidence—so as to fit into a syllogism that may itself be true or false (cf. *Aquinas* 153-55).\(^6\)

Chesterton’s most common and most devastating critique of empiricism stems from his study of impressionism. If—because we view whatever we view through our distorted senses as relayed through our mind’s prior conceptions and associations—we see only our impressions of an object and not the object itself, then empirical observation does not necessarily tell us anything about reality.\(^7\) If perception is not objectively valid, empirical observation may tell us as much about the observer as about reality, and cannot reliably be used to understand the world. Chesterton asserts in *Orthodoxy* that “There is no principle in nature,” only in the mind of person observing nature, and later gives post-Einsteinian physicists a certain measure of credit for “tell[ing] us frankly that what they describe is not the objective reality of the things they observe,” for admitting that “they are only observing certain disturbances or distortions, actually created by their own
attempt to observe” (Orthodoxy 51, “Collapse” 379). Since scientific observation is
distorted by the perspective of the observer, scientific research tends to reinforce the
beliefs and values of the power elite that funds it; the “chief use” of modern science,” as
Chesterton sees it, is to “provide long words to cover the errors of the rich” (Chesterton
“Celts” 133). Since the observations of science are themselves questionable,
extrapolations of these observations into scientific law are for Chesterton particularly
suspect. To defend the dignity of science by insisting on the universal validity of its laws
is, he suggests, to involve empiricism in a self-contradiction, for neither the whole
universe nor even the whole world has been physically observed (cf. Lauer 34-35). In
sum, “There are no laws [of science], but only weird repetitions” (Chesterton Orthodoxy
102).

Finally, Chesterton’s skepticism also extends also to the very material of the
autobiographer, the self. Long before he ever encountered Freud, Chesterton asserted in
an early essay that it was “unproved and unprovable” that “there is such a [thing as a]
permanent ‘I’” or “continuous” “self or ego” (qtd. in Lauer 49). Since all the cells of the
brain die and are replaced over time, the self has no physical continuity; since the self is
“definitely disputed by many metaphysicians,” its metaphysical continuity is at best in
doubt (qtd. in Lauer 49). His short stories are littered with men with multiple identities
and false faces; in The Man Who Was Thursday every character turns out to have falsified
his identity, except the character (Lucian Gregory) who openly falsified his identity. In
sum, Chesterton posits a bewildering world in which reason is epistemologically
unfounded, perception unsure, empiricism a sham, and the self in disarray. We are not
far here from Borges or Kafka, and it is not surprising that the former cited Chesterton as
a major influence, and the latter spoke warmly of his work (cf. Borges 82-83, 105, Janouch 57).

Chesterton’s seemingly nihilistic premises about reality—that “life” is “ridiculous,” that “Everything important is . . . absurd” and that “uncertainty” is the unavoidable human state—show him to be much closer to existentialism than many have suggested, but they seem an unpromising foundation for a totalistic system (qtd. in Pearson 476, 482). Chesterton is aware, however, that such a thorough-going epistemological skepticism as his own is not without its own difficulties. Like Pascal, Chesterton considers a pure epistemological skepticism to be existentially impossible. “The questions of the sceptic strike direct at the heart of this our human life; they disturb this world, quite apart from the other world; and it is exactly common sense that they disturb the most” (Chesterton Autobiography 174). One must act as if perception were reliable, else one could not walk down the street; one must act as if logic were valid, else one could not debate. Given the difficulties of establishing the validity of perception, even the “existence of the man next door” is an “undemonstrable dogma,” yet the skeptic who denies this dogma will run into severe practical difficulties (Chesterton “Conclusion” 160). Consequently, Chesterton argues, in daily life no one really lives by the “rationalis[t]” demand that we should believe nothing without incontrovertible proof (“Conclusion” 160). In daily life, no one is a true rationalist or a true skeptic. Chesterton is also not blind to, and in fact repeatedly references, the logical bind of the radical relativist: only through comparison with an objective reality can we establish the subjective nature of all truth claims; if we cannot know objective reality, then the ontological assumptions of relativism are themselves relative, and disputable (cf.
“Wells” 39-41). If nothing is certain, we have no compelling reason to accept nihilism (cf. Lauer 21). Nihilism is itself a cultural construction; one can trace, as Chesterton does, the “long and elaborate process of literary effort” through which the world became empty of meaning (“On Rudyard” 56).9

If objectivism (in both its rationalist and empiricist forms) and relativism are equally intellectually dubious enterprises, what can one believe? If a unified meaning for life—at least that “indestructible minimum” of meaning, that the material world is real and intellectually understandable (Chesterton “Picture” 61)—is both logically impossible and existentially necessary, how can one be intellectually consistent? Chesterton’s answer to these conundrums is similar to Kierkegaard’s: he answers in the words of Tertullian, “Credo Quia Impossibile” (Chesterton New Jerusalem 212, “Thomas Carlyle” 27, cf. “Paganism” 82).10 In an absurd world, believe in the absurd, which is to say, in a supra-rational, anti-empirical philosophy that admits that its own validity cannot be proven. Be, in a word, a fideist.11 A fideistic system claims that it cannot conclusively verify what it asserts; it accepts the skeptical critique of human knowledge and perception, but asserts that this critique says more about the contingent nature of human modes of knowledge and perception than about the world itself. The uncertain nature of human knowledge does not establish that truth and reality do not exist; it just establishes that we can never know them with the certainty we might like. We can think rationally if we make the “act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all” (Chesterton Orthodoxy 33), and we can act practically if we credally assent to the existence of the material world. Hence, Chesterton concludes that “creed and dogma [have] saved the sanity of the world” (Aquinas 110, cf. Orthodoxy 28). In a similar vein,
he also concludes that there is no intellectual contradiction in resolving disputes (such as
the validity or invalidity of reason and perception) about which proof is inherently
impossible, through believing without proof. One has no other option. Indeed, credalism
is for Chesterton the normative human condition; “Man can be defined as an animal that
makes dogmas” (“Conclusion” 151).

Chesterton became attracted to dogmatic Christianity partly because he saw it as
an essentially fideistic philosophy. For Chesterton, Christianity is above all a philosophy
that realizes both that the meaning of existence is unprovable and that if humanity is to
live existence must have a meaning. Christianity, in Chesterton’s estimation, explicitly
demands willed faith; unlike science or rationalism, it calls its beliefs creeds, which is to
say that, while still insisting on their truth value, it openly posits them as beliefs. On
these grounds, Chesterton began writing Christian apologetics before he came to believe
in Christianity himself. If Kierkegaard’s famous image for fideistic belief is the “leap in
the dark,” Chesterton’s dominant image (to which I shall later have occasion to return) is
that of a lock and a key. Christianity’s beliefs seem arbitrary and unfounded, just as the
“shape” of a key “is in a sense arbitrary” and makes no obvious sense to anyone other
than the locksmith. The same could be said of the lock which is the world; it comprises
an irregular and even bizarre pattern that is, in a sense, deliberately designed not to yield
its meaning. However, Chesterton suggests, if one takes the chance, the Pascal’s wager,
of trying, with one’s intellect and one’s life, to fit the key of faith into the lock of the
world, one will find that the key fits. The “elaborate pattern” of the strangely shaped key
which is the Faith strikingly fits the bizarre gaps in the strangely shaped lock which is the
world (Everlasting Man 214-15). Keys and locks have meaning, but only in reference to
each other and only when activated by the willed action of an individual. In the same way, Christianity’s supra-rational doctrines give the apparently meaningless world an extra-rational meaning and purpose for the believer. Though it cannot be objectively proven to the dispassionate observer, the world has a meaning. The truth cannot be proven, but it can be shared with a willing participant (cf. Kenner 116, Lauer 22).

But this discussion of the necessarily willed nature of belief begs an enormous question. Given that we must believe where we cannot prove, what, then should we believe? More than most existentialists, Chesterton holds that there are severe dangers in simply believing in belief. He is fond of pointing out that, as beliefs have consequences, believing in the wrong things can cause chaos: if we believe that non-being is better than being, we should encourage suicide; if we believe that people are to be treated in exactly the same manner as animals, we might encourage cannibalism. The common tenet in which Chesterton most emphatically disbelieves (and in which Kierkegaard most emphatically believes) is the primacy of the individual. The idea that each individual wills his own universe could seem to accord with Chesterton’s fundamentally existential perspective. Such a result, however, would simply endorse the solipsism he most wishes to avoid. As Chesterton remarks in Orthodoxy, “of all horrible religions the most horrible” is that of the “Inner Light,” the belief in the primacy of the individual conscience and will (76). If we each will our own world and are answerable only to our own impulses, then there is no reality we hold in common, and we are all as isolated in our own minds as inmates in mental hospitals. In fact, for this reason, Chesterton alleges that, while many people hold the primacy of the individual to some degree, “The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums” (Orthodoxy
For Chesterton, sanity is a communal, rather than an individual, possession (Coates *Crisis* 213).

Instead of simply believing in ourselves and our own impressions, we should, Chesterton suggests, believe in the few tenets whose validity people in general must assume in order to function: the reliability of perception, the validity of reason, and the existence (and intelligence) of other people. He attempts to derive his whole creed from these common truisms; Chesterton’s faith is a deliberate existential leap by which he bridges the gap, not between humanity and God, but between impression and reality. The first article in his early creed of “unproved and unprovable ideas” that nonetheless “all sane men believe” is that “the world around him and the people around him are real” (qtd. in Lauer 48). To live and to think, one must affirm without proof that the “primary act of recognition of any reality is real”; perception, like reason, receives its validity only through faith (Chesterton *Aquinas* 148, cf. 147).

Chesterton’s traditionalism is a corollary of these basic convictions. Chesterton was a good enough impressionist to realize that human thought and perception never exist in a vacuum—there is no thought unmarred by emotion and no perception undistorted by mental associations (cf. Barasch 26-27, 42-43). Consequently, it is not enough to simply preach faith in reason and the senses. Chesterton suggests that if we are to believe that human understanding is fundamentally accurate, we must reexamine those aspects of human thought and perception that rationalists and empiricists most harshly critique: principally, the tendency to think emotionally, the tendency to reach conclusions through association, and the tendency to view the world through the lens of inherited customs. He concludes that human perception can be generally accurate only if
these widespread, more or less universal elements of human thought either aid or, at the very least, do not distort, perception and understanding. Chesterton defines tradition as “democracy extended through time,” for tradition represents “a consensus of common human voices” of people throughout the ages (Orthodoxy 47). Consequently, he posits, to discard tradition is to suggest that “ordinary men in great unanimity” have no right to think (Chesterton Orthodoxy 48)

As many philosophers, beginning with Chesterton’s younger Catholic contemporary Jacques Maritain, have suggested, the skeptical methods of modern thought derive from the attempt to emphasize one element of human thought or perception to the detriment of the others. Maritain dates this tendency from Descartes. Descartes stresses reason and degrades the senses, scientists like Huxley employ the senses against tradition and intuition, Nietzsche emphasizes desire or the will over reason, and so on. In each case, a reductive model of valid perception and thought is posited against the multifarious methods by which people actually perceive and think; as a result, while many of these schools intended to build a more solid foundation for knowledge, the foundation further erodes and a basic metaphysical skepticism becomes more entrenched with every development. As Chesterton observes, “Since the modern world began in the sixteenth century, nobody’s system of philosophy has really corresponded to everybody’s sense of reality: to . . . common sense” (Aquinas 145).

Chesterton desires to cut this tendency off at the root. Hence, like Newman in A Grammar of Assent, he preaches faith in all the means by which people process their understanding of the world: reason, the senses, intuition, emotion, tradition, desire. Against the Nietzschean nihilists who said that man was a thing that must be overcome,
Chesterton preached that man was a thing that we had no choice but accept (“Second Thoughts” 602). He holds, again like Newman, that we must allow for, and accept, the basic tendencies of human thought and human nature as the foundation for any workable philosophical system (Chesterton “Wells” 38).

This fundamental, credal, and unequivocal acceptance of human understanding leads Chesterton to his famous populism, a political stance quite uncommon among Edwardian thinkers. Chesterton objected to the rise of the credentialed specialist, for if only an elite minority that has been trained in a certain method of thought is capable of knowing and discovering the truth on matters of fundamental importance to all (such as metaphysics), then it follows that the thought of humanity as a whole must be questionable and untrustworthy. The rise of the specialist also enshrines and makes permanent the tendency to divide and fragment human thought, a tendency that, as I have discussed with regard to H. G. Wells, both inadvertently and advertently aids the rise of nihilism.

As Chesterton explains it, the masses possess “Common sense”—“a sensibility duly distributed in all normal directions”—whereas the intellectual specialists possess “sensibility”—a “specialized sensibility in one” direction (Charles 111). The specialized tactics of the intellectuals make it likely that they will speak accurately about their particular field; however, this same privileging of a specialized method over all other means of perception and understanding make it likely that, through errors of omission, intellectuals will assess humanity or reality as a whole inaccurately. As a false premise invariably produces a false conclusion, the specialists’ reductive epistemology—in Chesterton’s terms, “contracted common sense”—leads them to a distorted view of the
“cosmos” (*Orthodoxy* 22-23). In contrast with the specialists, the masses are generally incorrect as regards the facts but correct as regards the big picture. As he writes, “Popular errors . . . . nearly always refer to some ultimate reality, about which those who correct them are themselves incorrect” (*Chesterton Aquinas* 109). To put the matter more starkly, when it comes to the basic, unresolvable issues of metaphysics and epistemology that he calls “first principles”—such as whether the material universe is real, reason is valid, or God exists—Chesterton holds that we can only accept the judgment of humanity as a whole, or despair of ever knowing anything. As he writes, “only mankind itself can bear witness to the abstract first principles of mankind, and in matters of theory I would always consult the mob” (*Chesterton George* 482). The quotation from Saint Augustine that convinces Newman to believe in the Roman Catholic Church is used by Chesterton to defend his faith in the masses: “Securus judicat orbis terrarum” (*George* 419).

In many ways, this conviction of the essential reliability of the masses determined the direction of Chesterton’s literary career. Chesterton, like Wells, rose to fame in the mass-market magazines and newspapers that came into being in the 1890s, as the effects of the Education Act of 1870 began to be felt (*Coates Crisis* 54). His weekly column in the (London) *Daily News* was probably the most read journalistic feature of the Edwardian period, and he resisted the pleadings of many friends that he abandon journalism for pure literature.¹⁴ Like other early twentieth-century authors, he saw journalism as the literature of the masses; he simply reversed the values implied by this judgment, and actively embraced the mass market (cf. *Carey* 97). His detective stories ran in the top pulp magazines; his drinking songs ran in whiskey advertisements; his religious poems, set to music, made it into the hymnals.
He considered the genres of mass literature to have the potential, when broadly and enduringly popular, to be the genuine successors of the popular forms of the past—the fairy tale or fantasy novel to succeed the folk tale and the dramatic serial to succeed the myth or legend—and to possess their cultural authority (Coates *Crisis* 59, Chesterton *Charles* 86). Chesterton often interchangeably employs the terms “myth,” “legend,” and “folklore” to refer to popular literature that has lasted through time and whose characters have an extratextual life of their own. These myths or legends function as the contemporary expressions of tradition, and as such possess epistemological value. For Chesterton, the most truly popular modern author is Dickens, who did not so much write novels as “make a mythology” of characters and places that took on an extra-textual life in culture and conversation and that now shape the way Britain perceives the world (*Charles* 88, 95). To Chesterton, Dickens, “the last of the mythologists,” is a sort of oracle of the masses, who both reveals the thoughts of the majority of people and teaches them what to think (*Charles* 87-88, 86). Dickens “led a mob,” for “Dickens was a mob” (*Victorian* 455, *Charles* 95). On a less exalted level, Chesterton also posits that all literature that meets with a wide readership encodes a message about “what it means to be human”; else, it would not have been so widely read (Chesterton *Robert* 154). As P. J. Kavanaugh observes, Chesterton wrote journalism to get his message to those “who perhaps had the best chance of understanding it” (349).

Chesterton’s affirmation of all human perception influenced not only his choice of literary markets but also his distinctive style. Chesterton was called “The Prince of Paradox,” and, as Hugh Kenner has noted in another context, his most famous stylistic device is deeply connected to his metaphysics. If the mass of people are right in their
perceptions, and the popularity of a work is a good indicator of how much credence people give it, then we should expect to find a good deal of truth in the writings of any influential thinker. Chesterton holds to this syllogism, however much he might disagree with a particular thinker, or however much two particular thinkers may disagree with each other. Even in his critiques of his contemporaries as *Heretics*, in his book of the same title, Chesterton affirms some basic insight in each thinker just as surely as he finds some basic error. Later in his career he goes so far as to say, “it is a privilege of those who contradict each other in their cosmos to be both right” (Chesterton *Aquinas* 73-74).

Though his definitions of paradox vary somewhat at different parts of his career, Chesterton generally defines paradox as a means by which one can within the limits of language simultaneously affirm apparently contradictory truths. In his book chapter, “The Paradoxes of Christianity,” he treats paradox as a means of “combining furious opposit[e]” truths without moderating either (*Orthodoxy* 93-95).\footnote{15} Chesterton’s style of unexpected juxtapositions, metaphysical jokes, serious examples for ludicrous premises and ludicrous examples for serious premises serves primarily to combine clearly separated, even opposite, parts of thought or reality into a single whole. Chesterton’s most common and most cutting critique of a thinker is that he is a reductionist (or, to use his own term, “monomaniac”), excluding some part of reality or rejecting some means of understanding due to an a priori principle. For instance, he alleges that George Bernard Shaw, although insightful about many matters, “cannot quite understand life, for he will not accept its contradictions” (Chesterton *George* 450). Chesterton was also famous as a humorist, and discussed humor in the same terms as paradox. In Chesterton’s terms,
while a “wit,” like Shaw, savages life for not living up to a single ideal, the humorist is one who accepts, enjoys, and affirms the “inconsistency in things” (George 387).

Chesterton also attempted to show his solidarity with the masses by aligning himself, first in sympathy and then in membership, with the Roman Catholic Church, a religious organization that many Edwardian thinkers, such as H. G. Wells, associated with the ignorant “multitude” (cf. Chesterton Victorian 453). For an idea to be held credally, some person or institution must assume the authority of credally declaring it, and the Catholic Church affirmed most of Chesterton’s central postulates. In the Catholic Church, he found an institution that credally asserted the validity of human perception and reason (in the Vatican I decrees), the world’s existence and unitary meaning (in the notion of sacramental reality), the importance of other people (in the doctrine of the Communion of Saints), and the value of tradition (in the Trent decrees). In the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, he found the worth and value of the self to be credally affirmed by a large section of humanity (cf. Chesterton Orthodoxy 131-33, Lauer 49). Above all, he considers Catholicism to be a synthesis of all of human thought, a refusal of the reductive epistemology that marks modernity, and a means of preserving “the old human life” against the reductionism of modernity (Chesterton Orthodoxy 157, cf. Chesterton “The Church” 452). Although at times Chesterton seems to equate human nature with European Christian civilization, he holds that each culture expresses important truths about human nature through its religion, and that the genius of Catholicism is to hold all these truths together through paradox rather than, like more rationalistic faiths, choosing between them. For the populist Chesterton, the anti-Catholicism of most British intellectuals and the low level of education of most British
Catholics are just added reasons to accept the Faith. In keeping with his belief that common sense is the distinctive property of the masses, he insists that the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of the masses, is a religion of “great philosophic common sense” (“Conclusion” 160).

My sketch of Chesterton’s philosophy shows rather neatly how and why he combined the roles of populist, journalist, and Catholic. What may be less clear is why his contemporaries regarded him as a sage. In Landow’s definition, sages possess a confrontational relationship with their audience, preaching from the margins to a fallen society, and claiming to be able to interpret truths otherwise indecipherable. A popular journalist who relies on appeals to common sense would hardly seem to fit this definition, however philosophical he might be. Among Chesterton’s contemporaries, Edwin Slosson, for one, felt compelled to address this issue. In his chapter on Chesterton in Six Major Prophets, he asks, “Can a journalist have a philosophy of life, and if so would it be worth talking about?” (129).

Although Chesterton’s approach to sage writing is as unconventional in its own way as is Wells’s, he was widely regarded by his contemporaries as a prophet and merits analysis as such. Chesterton’s work was heavily influenced by Ruskin and Newman, and it contains the fundamental traits of sage writing as defined by Landow’s study Elegant Jeremiahs. Landow observes that the sage or prophet figure arises in ages of transition, “when a people can no longer follow its wisdom literature” and the traditional beliefs and ways of life have been shaken (23). The sages “attac[k] . . . established political, moral, and spiritual powers” on the grounds that they have abandoned orthodox wisdom” and call the people back to an often radically revised version of their old faiths (Landow 23).
As Landow notes, the sages often justify their authority to make this prophetic appeal with the equally bold claim that they uniquely “comprehen[d] the nature of man” and therefore can best diagnose and cure the ills of the body politic (43). The sages “solace” the public they confront by assuring them, in the face of social chaos and metaphysical uncertainty, that the universe does have a knowable “meaning and order” (Landow 22).

As I have shown, Chesterton possesses both an original and coherent theory of human nature and an overwhelming desire to restore meaning to the universe. He observes with concern and disdain the Edwardian intellectual trends that I have discussed in my chapter on Wells—the rise of the efficiency men and the cult of the expert, the establishment of Nietzsche as a philosophical icon, the endurance of “science” and “progress” as terms of value, and the literary-critical prominence of James’s elitist aesthetic. He sees in each of the major intellectual trends of the day a violation of human nature and fall from communal sanity. The experts, as I have shown, fissure and fracture human knowledge, abetting the nihilism preached by Nietzsche. James’s aesthetic, as I shall later discuss, requires the rejection of mass literature, and perhaps of the mass itself. And to believe in progress and the scientific expert is quite exactly to disbelieve in tradition and the instincts of the populace. Chesterton’s disdain for his fellow intellectuals is immense.

The masses are Chesterton’s primary sign of hope, but while they may fail to fully assent to science and progress, they possess no conscious or coherent alternative belief system. As W. F. R. Hardie puts it, for Chesterton, “The plain man is right, but is unconscious of his rightness”; as Chesterton’s protagonist Father Brown puts it, “A
Philistine is only a man who is right without knowing why” (Hardie 472, Chesterton “Song” 501). Further, as I have already implied, though mass literature retains its mythic potential for Chesterton, this potential is seldom actualized. Chesterton considers much of the best-selling literature after Dickens to have been a passing fad, with little staying power or metaphysical value (Charles 95). To Chesterton’s dismay, an author who actually despises the masses’ beliefs and tastes can become a passing sensation by exploiting their values, and advertising can account for the success of individual works (Charles 99, “Popularity” 628). While all popular writing contains a truth to be discovered and interpreted by a sage such as Chesterton, only long-lasting, much-beloved myths or legends speak with the voice of the masses and are therefore true in at least their main points or “outline” (Charles 89, 87, 95, Everlasting Man 29). And, in Chesterton’s opinion, few stories since Dickens’s time have seized the public imagination widely enough for a long enough period of time to be considered legitimate myths.

Chesterton, as surely as Virginia Woolf or H. G. Wells, felt that intellectuals and artists were attempting to change the nature of humanity, and he objected to that change. As a result, his relation to his society was confrontational. In works like Fancies versus Fads, What’s Wrong With the World, Orthodoxy, and The Everlasting Man, Chesterton called upon England to abandon twentieth-century relativism and return to the abandoned verities of human nature. In trumpeting populism and tradition, Chesterton is a sage calling his society to a rejected ideal.

Chesterton’s tendency to treat the masses as a clue to the riddle of contemporary existence also suggests that he claims the two most important skills of the sage: the ability to speak for and interpret the mute and seemingly uninterpretable, and the ability
to unify human thought into a coherent whole (Landow 60). Chesterton’s metaphysical version of populism considered the unformulated instincts of the masses to be the most reliable index of the truth on important matters. For Chesterton, the common people’s lack of systematic thought preserves them from the reductionistic fallacies of modern intellectuals. The thought of the masses is “often too complex to be clear headed” reflecting a “balance of considerations which are never clearly held before the mind” (Hardie 470, cf. Chesterton “Penny” 26). Chesterton’s job as a populist prophet is, then, to formulate this inarticulate doxa into an orthodoxy. As each of the central ideas of Western metaphysics and British politics were decidedly unsettled in the early twentieth century, Chesterton’s role as “the plain man’s apologist” gave him the authority to “formulate a view of the universe” in the name of the majority of the population (Bullett 22, Chesterton “Introductory Remarks” 3). As he wrote with some exuberance early in his career, in the twentieth century years “Everything will be denied. Everything will become a creed”; his intention to help write this creed is left unstated but is clearly implied (Chesterton Heretics 206-7). Chesterton casts himself as the prophet of the “obvious,” of doctrines the prophets of the age are too wise according to the wisdom of the world to believe and that the mass of men are too inarticulate to express (Orthodoxy 12). With a few exceptions, Chesterton was strikingly successful in this role. Especially for the first half of his career, even his enemies like Wells and Pound usually assume that Chesterton, in Pound’s famous phrase, “is . . . the mob” (Pound “To John Quin,” emphasis mine, Wells “Past” 17, Slosson 132).

George Landow’s influential study asserts that the sage’s defining characteristic is that he attempts, following the decline of traditional religion, to formulate a new totalistic
philosophy, a new vision of a world with a central, discoverable meaning (Landow 45, cf. Holloway 11). From his early work *Heretics* on, Chesterton preached that having a unified and coherent “view of the universe” was the most important thing in life, and that the neglect of theories “about ultimate things” was responsible for most of the problems of the modern world (“Introductory Remarks” 3-4). As my survey of his thought has suggested, Chesterton, like Wells, is even more concerned with defending the possibility of a unitary philosophy of life than he is with the contents of this philosophy.²² As Chesterton writes, he wishes to defend a meaningful “universe” against skeptical intellectuals who would rather posit a meaningless and fragmented “multiverse” (*New Jerusalem* 163).

Chesterton’s philosophical system, as I have sketched it, is an intellectually complicated and reasonably consistent attempt to reinvent the sage discourse in an age when it was on the wane. It should be apparent, however, that this system has one primary sticking point: the authority he grants to the audience. Chesterton’s system requires a mass audience that possesses stable, or at least continuous beliefs and tastes. Since for Chesterton the response of the masses is an accurate register of human nature, which is itself an accurate register of the universe, any significant and lasting shift in the response of the masses changes or destroys Chesterton’s universe. If a rival sage could convince the masses of a fundamentally different set of doctrines over a sustained period of time, then Chesterton would have to accept either these doctrines (and thus that he is a false sage) or the unreliability of the masses (and thus that his is a false system). From *Heretics*—in which he critiqued the most prominent authors of the day as heretics, men “whose philosophy is quite solid, quite coherent, and quite wrong”—on, this possibility is
an obvious concern of Chesterton’s (Chesterton “Introductory Remarks” 6, cf. Manalive 34, “Why” 190). While Chesterton’s philosophy, unlike Wells’s, can handle any amount of opposition from intellectuals, it is particularly vulnerable to mass resistance to his ideas.

An even worse scenario for Chesterton would be if intellectuals, through the education system, could train the masses to disbelieve in themselves and tradition and accept nihilism and a fragmentary universe; it would then follow either that the masses were not the repository of human nature after all, or that human nature itself affirms a multiverse. In either case, Chesterton’s universe dissolves, and his philosophy collapses back into impressionism. This event is enacted quite graphically in his novel The Man Who Was Thursday. The heroes—philosophical policemen fighting a secret campaign against a nihilistic, anarchistic “intellectual conspiracy”—flee from an important anarchist leader, but become surrounded by a mob of angry French peasants (Chesterton Annotated Thursday 79). The policeman/philosopher Dr. Bull realizes that the peasantry has turned to nihilism and anarchism, and that they intend to kill the defenders of order and meaning. The “mass of ordinary men” appear to have become “a pack of dirty modern thinkers” and the consequences are rather dire for our heroes (Chesterton Man 597). Dr. Bull concludes that there are only two explanations of the phenomenon: either “humanity” has gone “mad” or he has. The former explanation is so disconcerting that he chooses the latter, and begins imaging “the small cushioned cell in Hanwell” where he must truly be at the moment (Chesterton Man 598). The more self-confident and more literary philosophical detective known as Professor de Worms takes the alternate option, and exclaims, in the words of Pope, that no “human light is left, nor glimpse divine!/ Lo,
thy dread Empire, Chaos, is restored/ . . . And universal darkness buries all” (Chesterton *Man* 601). If the masses ultimately fail him, Chesterton’s authority and universe collapse.


As I have shown, as regards the question of audience, Chesterton is the exact antithesis of Carlyle; his authority directly corresponds with his popularity, and any prolonged decline in popularity is a threat. But Chesterton’s self-appointed task—to inform the masses of their rightness—itself suggests that the masses are halfway towards unbelief in the ideas he posits. Since Chesterton’s system is so potentially fragile, it is perhaps unsurprising that he became embroiled in controversies with thinkers whose popularity and widespread influence threatened to make real each of the scenarios he most feared. In George Bernard Shaw, he fought a sage with an equally large following and equally nimble wit, but with ideas antithetical to his own. In the modernists (primarily Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot), he fought skeptical intellectuals who possessed a literary-critical acumen quite the equal of his own, but who were deeply committed to specialism, and deeply contemptuous of the masses. Shaw threatened to convert the masses to a different system; Eliot and Pound threatened to alter their beliefs indirectly, by influencing the educators and pundits who influenced them. These literary conflicts are in many ways the defining moments of the early (1901-10) and late (1927-36) portions of Chesterton’s career, and, though he acquitted himself respectably, he did not clearly win either of them. Each constitutes a traumatic blow to his authority, a blow that came on suddenly and left lasting damage. Chesterton’s final work, his autobiography, is
centrally, if often implicitly, concerned with recasting these controversies and thereby undoing the damage they inflicted upon his authority.

Chesterton’s earliest important literary rivals were his fellow sages Wells and Shaw. While the nihilism of the early 1890s may have suggested otherwise, in 1901 Chesterton entered a literary world already crowded with prophets. Many felt that the Empire was failing, that both the old certainties of traditional religion and the new certainties of science were fading, and that a new age was beginning. Some significant Edwardian writers, prominently Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and the early James Joyce, skeptically analyzed the new century, but refrained from attempting to prophesy its nature. However, many major and minor Edwardian writers—figures as varied as Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, W. B. Yeats, and Edward Carpenter—wrote books and formed movements that attempted to predict and control the direction of this new age.23

Chesterton’s 1905 novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* comically depicts an early twentieth century landscape so overrun with prophets that every conceivable action anyone could do fulfills someone’s prophetic schema (220-21).

In a country overrun by prophets, at a time when public interest in literary figures is at an historical high point, the problem of audience becomes particularly acute (cf. Gross *Rise* 200). Shaw, Wells, Chesterton, and Hilaire Belloc recognized each other as the most prominent prophets of their day, and openly fought each other for control of the mass audience that seemed likely to control the future (cf. Coates *Crisis* 126). While the fight underwent many configurations (the most common alignment was Shaw and Wells versus Chesterton and Belloc), unquestionably the most prominent and longest-lasting battle was between Shaw and Chesterton. While Chesterton constituted a serious
problem for Wells, Chesterton himself considered Wells’s appeal to the future to be an open fallacy—essentially, the appeal to ignorance—and so was less concerned with Wells as an opponent than with Shaw. In confronting Shaw, Chesterton considered himself to be writing against “an acknowledged prophet” who has made his own “church and creed” (George 444). Shaw saw in Chesterton a rival who had also tried to write “something like the Bible . . . that is, to lay down the law in religion, economics, history, and philosophy for the following generations,” a rival whose divergent scriptures must be “cut out” from the Bible of the future (Shaw “To H. G. Wells” 168-71). Shaw and Chesterton were intellectual “opposite[s]” who wrote against each other for thirty years and debated publicly for twenty; Hesketh Pearson called them “The Debaters of the Century” (Slosson 131, qtd. in Hugo 263).

Shaw’s philosophy is in some ways akin to Wells’s. Shaw too attempts to create a meaning for a world which has never previously meant anything. Shaw first became famous as a critic of the established order, as a sardonic Irishman who saw English society as nonsense and who mocked any conventional belief in God. Like Wells, he was a radical who wished to break the current world apart, but who saw a shapeless society and an ateleological public as disasters. As Shaw observed, “Civilization needs a religion [conceived primarily as a sense of ultimate purpose] as a matter of life or death” (“Preface” 337). Again like Wells, he sought a solution for this dilemma through an evolutionary schema that makes current humanity simply a transitional state on the way to a higher being. For both men, bureaucratic socialism serves as a means of bringing more and more of human life under conscious control and organization (Shaw Back 421). The organization socialism imposes is a necessary, willed step toward evolving a higher
human life and ultimately even a higher, more rational species—the superman. The series of alliances that Shaw constructs between himself and Wells—always quickly broken off by Wells—between 1905 and 1932 suggests the fundamental affinities of their projects.

Shaw’s evolutionary philosophy varies from Wells in some significant ways, however, and these differences make him a more serious problem for Chesterton than Wells is. Shaw posited, most famously, the existence of the Life Force, a kind of process theology God who is slowly coming into being but never fully realized. The Life Force represents life’s mysterious tendency towards order and increasing complexity (cf. Warren Smith 33, 39). The ultimate goal of the Life Force, achieved through “Creative Evolution,” is the complete triumph of will over matter. The basic premise of Creative Evolution is that, contrary to orthodox Darwinism, change can be willed, that “the will to do anything can and does, at a certain point of intensity set up by conviction of necessity, create and organize new tissue to do it with” (Shaw “Preface” 261, cf. “Preface” 294). As Godhead is the state of omnipotence over matter, Creative Evolution is the “path to Godhead” (Shaw Back 423). For Shaw the “irreducible reality of human will” is more central, more final than material facts (Baker xi). Unlike Wells’s Open Conspiracy, the Life Force suggests that there is something inherent in existence that desires and responds to meaning and order. Order is thus only half imposed from the outside; there is something inside all life that desires it. While Shaw sees Creative Evolution as reaching its apex in the future, this apex is the culmination of tendency towards order he sees as presently inherent in life; thus, while his philosophy invokes the future, it is less dependent on a radical disjunction between the present and the future than is Wells’s. As
Chesterton realized, Shaw’s contributions to the cult of progress were largely accidental (Chesterton *George* 477).

Shaw’s philosophy is a problem for Chesterton because it too is an attempt to determine an irreducible minimum of faith necessary for human life. Creative Evolution or the Life Force amounts to a bare sense that life is in some way teleologically oriented and that what one individually does matters. Shaw’s philosophy amounts to a fideistic belief in purpose that, rather cautiously, refuses to specify except in very general terms the nature of this purpose or of humanity. Though his rhetoric on the point varies, Shaw posits a rival human nature to Chesterton’s, also based on the bare attempt to avoid nihilism, and posits that the world in some way means. Since the essence of human nature for Shaw is, however, its capacity for purposeful change, his idea of human nature is almost always in conflict with Chesterton’s. While Chesterton’s human nature is reflected in the customs of the majority of people as they currently exist, the Life Force is invariably against convention and for change (Warren Smith 33, cf. Chesterton *George* 450). The contrast Shaw’s aboriginal Serpent makes between Eve and itself exactly parallels the differences between Chesterton and Shaw’s approach to human nature: “You see things; and you say ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were, and I say, ‘Why not?’” (*Back* 345). Shaw sides with Nietzsche and Wells in saying that current humanity needs to be surpassed, and Chesterton refuses to “despair of man” as he currently exists (Chesterton “Second Thoughts” 602). If Chesterton’s reading public and, later, Church were large enough to make a persuasive case for his reading of human nature, the combined publics of Wells and Shaw were also large enough to call it into question. Chesterton realized throughout his career that the question of whether “the normal . . .
holds the centre of the stage” was the fundamental point on which the contest between himself and Shaw rested (Chesterton “Second Thoughts” 605).

Chesterton and Shaw had innumerable debates, but the one that damaged Chesterton’s reputation most suddenly and most permanently was undoubtedly what became known as the Chesterbelloc Controversy in the *New Age* magazine in 1908.

Belloc, Chesterton, Wells, and Shaw brawled for much of the first half of the year in the *New Age’s* pages, first over the desirability of socialism, eventually over their authority, reputation, and whatever else came to mind. As Belloc acknowledged in the controversy itself, the *New Age* was one of the two most influential journals of the day among intellectuals and the literati, and the stakes of the controversy were high (Belloc “Not” 289, Gross *Rise* 227). Shaw’s contribution to the controversy was his article, “The Chesterbelloc: A Lampoon,” and, as the name by which the controversy has been remembered suggests, his blow was by far the most effective.

A brief summary of Chesterton and Wells’s early contributions to the debate will help contextualize Shaw’s article. Chesterton explains in his essay, “Why I Am Not a Socialist,” that, as we might expect given our overview of his philosophy, his fundamental problem with socialism is that the masses object to it. Chesterton writes, “I believe very strongly in the mass of the common people. I do not mean [like Wells and Shaw] in their ‘potentialities,’ I mean in their faces, in their habits, and in their admirable language” (“Why” 190). And the poor, even more than the rest of the community, desire the “privacy of home, the control of one’s own children, the minding of one’s own business” (Chesterton “Why” 190). In this matter, the opinions of the poor, uninfluenced by the intellectual trends of the twentieth century, reflect “the ancient sanities of
humanity; the ten commandments of man” (Chesterton “Why” 190). When the poor rise up against capitalism it will be to distribute property, not to consolidate it in the hands of the state. Wells grants that Chesterton may be right; it is possible that “there are incurable things in the mind of the common man flatly hostile to our [Utopian socialist] ideals” (“About” 134). However, Wells objects, Chesterton has put forth no Utopia of his own, and “Purely unhelpful criticism isn’t enough for a man of his size. It isn’t fair for him to go about sitting on other people’s Utopias” (“About” 135). Showing a fundamental failure to understand Chesterton’s objection to all Utopians, he demands a Utopia from Chesterton. After another article by Belloc and another by Chesterton, Shaw enters the fray.

Shaw’s attack on Chesterton in “The Chesterbelloc: A Lampoon” is incisive and original, and cuts to the heart of Chesterton’s authority. Shaw fights on two fronts. First, unlike Wells, he questions Chesterton’s claim to speak for and interpret the masses. He suggests instead that Chesterton lacks the courage of an artist to identify his opinions as simply his own. Shaw complains, “Chesterton never says, ‘I . . . desire this, believe that . . . He always says that the English people desires it; that the dumb democracy which has never yet spoken (save through the mouth of the Chesterbelloc) believes it” (“Chesterbelloc” 138). In Chesterton and Belloc’s rhetoric, “To set yourself against the Chesterbelloc is . . . to set yourself against all the forces, active and latent (especially latent) of humanity” (Shaw “Chesterbelloc” 138). According to Shaw, this insistence that an author speaks not merely for him or herself but for the inarticulate masses is just a trick of “Yellow Journalism,” a ruse that degrades Chesterton’s work (“Chesterbelloc”
138). By contrast, Shaw’s public image, “G. B. S.” is “unique, fantastic, unrepresentative, inimitable . . . undesirable on any large scale” (“Chesterbelloc” 137).

Shaw also accuses Chesterton’s alliance with Belloc against Wells and himself of having become a straight jacket for his talent. The four-legged “chimera” that Shaw dubs the “Chesterbelloc” is a popular “pantomime beast”; however, since “Chesterton and Belloc are not the same sort of Christian, not the same sort of Pagan, not the same sort of anything intellectual” its movements are difficult to coordinate (Shaw “Chesterbelloc” 137, 140). Because Belloc’s rigidly defined faith and fierce temperament make it difficult for him to make compromises, Chesterton must make all the “intellectual sacrifices” necessary for them to “keep step” inside this “unnatural beast” (Shaw “Chesterbelloc” 139, 140). Especially, Chesterton accepts traditional Christianity only in order to keep the Chesterbelloc together. Chesterton is for this reason “a great force in danger of being wasted” as he suppresses his originality in subservience to Belloc (Shaw “Chesterbelloc” 143). Whereas “the most complete detachment” is necessary for his “vocation” as a “philosopher,” Chesterton is too subservient to all of his influences (Shaw “Chesterbelloc” 138). For example, Shaw’s close reading of Chesterton and his own Who’s Who entries suggests that Chesterton too strictly adheres to “the cult of ma mere,” whereas Shaw in his “self-sufficiency” has “suppressed his parents” (“Chesterbelloc” 136, emphasis Shaw’s). Shaw insists that, to be a true intellectual force, Chesterton must put forth his own, original Utopia to be judged in comparison to those of Wells and Shaw. In sum, Chesterton’s work comes down to a “plea for excess and outrageousness . . . and a heartfelt protest against Shavianism, tempered by a terrified admiration of it” (Shaw “Chesterbelloc” 142).
This attack on Chesterton was quite original, and shows a perceptive understanding of Chesterton’s thought. No previous writer or commentator of whom I can find record questions Chesterton’s right to represent humanity en masse, and few question it at any point in his career. For example, Wells, Pound, and Eliot all hate and fear the possibility of mob rule, and object to Chesterton precisely as the literary embodiment of the mob. Shaw alone holds that “since ‘the mass’ is an imaginary construct, displacing the unknowable multiplicity of human life, it can be shaped at will, in accordance with the wishes of the imagination” (Carey 23). If the mass of humanity, as Shaw assumes, are unknowable or have no opinions, then there is no collective truth, only individual values, and Chesterton’s philosophy collapses into impressionism.

Chesterton’s originality is also rarely a question before this point. His bizarre fantasias like *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Man Who Was Thursday* and quick wit made him known as a writer of vast originality; the idea that his thought is largely derivative has no precedent. In the *New Age* controversy itself, Wells had depicted Belloc as only “a faint aura, about the spectacular masses of Chesterton” (“About” 132). Shaw’s attack, of course, cuts to the heart of Chesterton’s prophetic authority, of his claim to offer a unique, unusually perceptive, and idiosyncratic appreciation of humanity. The brilliance of Shaw’s attack is that it places Chesterton in a double-bind. If Chesterton counters the accusation that he is a subservient part of the Chesterbelloc by establishing his literary originality and uniqueness, he implicitly grants that, as an oddity, he does not represent the masses. If, on the other hand, Chesterton counters by establishing the ways in which he does represent the mass, he grants that to this extent his thought is entirely unoriginal, and that he is subservient to the thought of others. To fail to respond is to grant the truth
of all the charges, and any response must grant at least half the charges. Shaw himself admitted in a letter to Chesterton that the “the New Age article” was “an assault below the belt” (“To Chesterton” 759). Shaw does not generally bother to prove his points against Chesterton, but by cutting to the heart of both his metaphysical system and his authority (and coining a memorable tag line), he launched an attack whose damages would long remain.

The “Chesterbelloc” tag followed Chesterton for the rest of his life. Despite his attempt to refute Shaw’s charges in his reply essay, “The Last Rationalist,” “the public quickly seized on the term ‘Chesterbelloc’” and it did permanent damage to his reputation (Furlong 10). While Chesterton remained a popular author, the idea that he was simply the more amusing and more diplomatic spokesman for the deeply intelligent but vitriolic and bigoted Belloc gradually became widespread. For instance, nearly twenty years after the controversy, T. S. Eliot—who is not prone to consciously agree with Shaw about anything—mocks “the Belloc-Chesterton gospel,” complaining that Chesterton “sing[s] the same tune” as Belloc and that his “mind is not equipped for sustained” thought (Rev. of Outline 71). Julius West’s biography of Chesterton—with which Chesterton was familiar—devotes five pages to the Chesterbelloc controversy, largely taking Shaw’s side, even echoing Shaw’s doubts about Chesterton’s right to represent the masses (139-44, esp. 139-40).25 Newspaper cartoonists illustrated the Chesterbelloc, and the beast was popularly named as the author of Chesterton and Belloc’s collaborative projects (Masie Ward 549-50). In short, Shaw’s “creation of the Chesterbelloc formed an image of Belloc and Chesterton in the public mind which neither was ever able to shake off” (Pearce 131).26 Chesterton landed a few effective
blows in his counterattack—primarily when he branded Shaw a “Puritan” who rejects both the world and humanity as they are in favor of a narrow and an intellectually dubious ideal world and humanity—but was unable to undo the damage to his own reputation (Chesterton *George* 381, 431 ff, cf. Pearson 580, 582, Furlong 45). The Chesterbelloc term was to follow Chesterton all the way up to the obituaries and creeps into his posthumously published autobiography (cf. Dark 540). Landow explains that the sages often interpret “grotesque” phenomena and monstrous “chimeras” in an effort to show that even the most apparently horrifying and unnatural aspects of modern life fit into a universal order and possess a meaning (76 ff.). As the Chesterbelloc, Chesterton himself has become in a surprisingly literal sense a monstrous chimera whose meaning he must interpret to restore the coherence of his philosophical system.

Chesterton’s reactions to attacks on his authority are in some ways harder to trace than those of my other sages. He kept no diary, rarely answered letters, and did not usually openly admit the gravity of an attack. However, Chesterton’s tendency to be continually involved in controversy with the most famous authors of his day—with Robert Blatchford over the existence of God, with H. G. Wells over *The Outline of History*, with Bertrand Russell over education, with Dean Inge over theology, with T. S. Eliot over literary criticism, to give just a few examples—suggests that he was keenly aware of how much the popularity of any radically different philosophy threatened his system. He confesses in his autobiography, “I have always had a weakness for arguing with anybody,” and his literary persona is that of an intellectual brawler (262). The sheer volume of Chesterton’s works about and against Shaw suggests that he was aware that Shaw’s status as a sage especially threatened his own. Along with Chesterton’s relatively
few plays, Chesterton on Shaw comprises Volume XI of his collected works; I know of no other example of an author allotting such a prominent place to a particular rival. Whether Chesterton himself possessed one or not, Chesterton’s work certainly has a repetition-compulsion with regard to his battles with Shaw and its authority has certainly been traumatized in a Shavian manner.

Although Shaw does not occupy many pages of Chesterton’s autobiography, the text itself identifies Chesterton’s controversies with Shaw as one of its primary concerns. Chesterton writes that he “began arguing with Mr. Bernard Shaw in print almost as early as [he] began doing anything” and that their “controversy” has now occupied “the greater part of [their] lives” (Autobiography 213, 186). More philosophically, he depicts Shaw as his perfect antithesis, the ideal enemy, who is therefore central to his life and thought. “My controversy with G. B. S., both logically and chronologically, is from the beginning. Since then I have argued with him on almost every subject in the world; and we have always been on opposite sides” (Chesterton Autobiography 214). Chesterton, in fact, apologizes for the relatively minimal amount of the text that explicitly addresses Shaw, claiming that “it is a mere accident of the arrangement of this book that he [Shaw] has not figured in it prominently from the first” (Autobiography 212).

Perhaps most tellingly, Chesterton in his autobiography also equates an inability to successfully refute Shaw with death, and the ability to refute him with life itself. In 1914, Chesterton writes, “I was bowled over by a very bad illness, which lasted for many months and at one time came very near to ending so as to cut me off from all newspaper communications and this wicked world. The last thing I did while I was still on my feet, though already very ill, was to . . . . tr[y] to write a reply to Bernard Shaw”
(Autobiography 233). However, before he gets far in this reply at all, he finds himself “incapable of writing anything” (Chesterton Autobiography 233). Soon he is also “incapable of really reading anything” (Chesterton Autobiography 235). The primary effect of this illness, as the autobiography depicts it, is Chesterton’s loss of literacy; to put the matter more pointedly, this illness, which Chesterton associates with Shaw, deprives him of his authorship. He can neither write nor read, and he is cut off from his newsprint “pulpit” (cf. Chesterton Autobiography 119-20).

Months later, Chesterton suddenly recovers. Two events mark this recovery. First, Chesterton reads an immense amount of Belloc (Chesterton Autobiography 235). “And then, like one resuming the normal routine of his life, I started again to answer Mr. Bernard Shaw” (Chesterton Autobiography 236). In sum, Chesterton lives as an author when he can refute Shaw and dies when he cannot, and, as the Chesterbelloc controversy might lead one to expect, Belloc is lodged at the heart of the question. In the terms of my critical paradigm, Shaw has inflicted a traumatic blow on Chesterton’s authorial authority, and Chesterton can recover from it only by retelling the Chesterbelloc controversy and thereby altering its outcome. In his autobiography, Chesterton attempts simultaneously to accept his close connection with Belloc’s thought—the Chesterbelloc—and to recontextualize this connection so that, rather than a liability, it becomes a means of overcoming the damage Shaw has inflicted on his authority.

Though it made no great impact on the public in 1908, Chesterton’s initial reply to the Chesterbelloc attack, an essay entitled “The Last of the Rationalists,” contains the germ of how, twenty-seven years later, he will attempt to autobiographically recast Shaw’s attack. As befits his frequent use of the paradox to unify apparently opposite
perspectives, Chesterton in controversy generally grants the point at issue but, by casting it as the negative pole of a paradox, transforms its meaning and synthesizes it into his own system. Consistent with this pattern, Chesterton’s response to the Chesterbelloc attack in both “The Last of the Rationalists” and—more successfully and on a grander scale—in the Autobiography is to grant that he does not substantially differ from Belloc, but by the same token, he does not substantially differ from the rest of humanity, and so has a right to speak for the people en masse. He may not be more representative of “mankind” than “the people on an omnibus, but as compared with Wells and Shaw, [he is] simply mankind. Shaw and Wells, having never seen mankind before in their lives, are naturally alarmed. This monstrous animal, the Chesterbelloc, may well terrify them; it is humanity on the move” (Chesterton “Last” 348). In a Chestertonian paradox, his originality consists in being the only unoriginal literary man.

To consolidate his authority in his autobiography, Chesterton must reaffirm that he does represent the masses (and thereby, in his intellectual schema, humanity itself), and that representing the masses is a sufficient basis for the sage’s authority to interpret the world. Consequently, Chesterton subsumes the traumatic Chesterbelloc episode into his own philosophical system by penning one of the most consistently anti-individualistic autobiographies of his time.

Many autobiographical theorists have discussed the autobiographer’s inability to narrate his or her own origin, and how this problem serves to deconstruct a genre premised upon the autonomous self. In what must be one of the most memorable opening sentences of any English autobiography, Chesterton confronts this dilemma. He writes, “Bowing down in blind credulity, as is my custom, before mere authority and the
tradition of the elders, superstitiously swallowing a story I could not test at the time by experiment or private judgment, I am firmly of the opinion that I was born on the 29th of May, 1874” (21). As the sages gain authority by confronting and interpreting problems others ignore or avoid, Chesterton gains authority in the genre of autobiography by interpreting a generic problem other autobiographers—particularly Victorians and Edwardians—usually dodge. Chesterton’s opening joke grounds his autobiography in his philosophy from the outset. He posits that the date of his birth, like everything else in human existence, cannot be known with scientific certainty. He grants that it is entirely possible that “the story of [his] birth may be untrue”; he certainly can offer no empirical evidence to affirm it (Chesterton Autobiography 21). Doubtless, the “Higher Criticism” could find plausible reasons to “questio[n] in theory” Chesterton’s birth-narrative; doubtless, atheistical science could find plausible reasons to suggest that Chesterton, like the universe, has no origin, and “was never born at all” (Chesterton Autobiography 21). As Chesterton asserts plainly, he overcomes this epistemological bind only by having faith in collective tradition: “my birth . . . is an incident which I accept, like some poor ignorant peasant, only because it has been handed down to me by oral tradition” (Autobiography 21). In keeping with Chesterton’s philosophy, tradition—or “hearsay evidence”—is valid “human evidence,” so-called because it is the collective testimony of human beings as to the truth of matters not otherwise conclusively verifiable (Autobiography 21). To deny the peasants’ concept of tradition is to reject the capacity of humanity as a whole to know truth, to reject, in Chesterton’s terms, “common sense” (Autobiography 21). In Chesterton’s pointed reductio ad absurdum, if we do so there is no Chesterton and no autobiography (Autobiography 21).
Chesterton’s opening page thus makes the mere fact of his own existence an example of his epistemological theories; he himself is a fact known through the common sense of the masses. Chesterton is not born an isolated individual; he is born a collective tradition. As he explicitly indicates, if we, Chesterton’s “readers,” are to read on, we must possess the “common sense” needed to accept his conclusions on these points (Autobiography 21). Because the matter of birth is a sticking point for the genre of autobiography for precisely the reasons Chesterton pinpoints, and because the didacticism of Chesterton’s interpretation of this difficulty is defused by his jokes, readers are likely to grant the concessions he requests. And these concessions are deeply important. As many narrative theorists have noted, the opening page of a narrative possesses vast structural importance, as it sets the terms for and the reader’s expectations of the rest of the book. The opening page functions as an implicit contract with the reader. To grant what this opening demands—that the collective has primacy over the individual, that we can know the truth of the present only by assuming the value of the past—is to grant implicitly that human knowledge and human nature are oriented towards tradition rather than discovery, towards stasis rather than towards change. And, in the context of the Chesterton/Shaw debates, to grant that human nature is oriented towards tradition and stasis rather than towards discovery and change is to grant that Chesterton’s traditionalism, which emphasizes continuity and the masses, is right and that Shaw’s Creative Evolution, which emphasizes change and the exceptional individual, is wrong. Here, as in Chesterton’s George Bernard Shaw, Shaw fails to understand the world and his own species because “he has no living traditions” (George 377). This time, the scene of battle is well chosen. As the Chesterbelloc controversy brought out, a great
disadvantage of Shaw’s individualism—”his almost Satanic self-possession”—is that, lacking antecedents, he is incapable of having been born (Chesterton George 377).

Though apparently loosely structured, the rest of Chesterton’s autobiography is a long extrapolation from these initial premises. The anti-individualistic theme, through which Chesterton undermines Shaw and reasserts his claim to interpret the masses, is particularly strong. Even the titles and primary subjects of the chapters proclaim it. The autobiography’s first chapter is entitled “Hearsay Evidence,” and is largely concerned with events that transpired among Chesterton’s relatives before he was born. Four other chapters take their titles and subjects not from events in Chesterton’s life, but from groups of friends he has had. Another—“The Fantastic Suburb”—takes its matter from a neighborhood. Less than half of the chapter titles refer to Chesterton’s beliefs or actions.29 At times, Chesterton almost seems to flaunt this reversal of the genre’s (and Shaw’s) conventionally individualistic values. In defiance of the damage the Chesterbelloc controversy has done to his reputation, he devotes a full chapter, “Portrait of a Friend,” to the subject of Belloc. As Chesterton says almost militantly, he refuses to “do [his] duty as a true modern, by cursing everybody who made [him] whatever” he is (Autobiography 38). The extent to which Chesterton’s autobiography violates the general assumptions of the genre was not lost on the book’s early reviewers. For example, the TLS, which considered the autobiography to be “a very good book—one of his best books” and to be his “most lucid exposition” of his philosophy, nonetheless wondered if a book that spends so much space discussing “friends” and “family” rather than oneself could be a “proper autobiograph[y]” (“G. K. Chesterton: Child” 540-41, cf. Rev. of Autobiography 547-48).
The autobiography’s depiction of Chesterton’s life, career, and literary authority depends upon on and supports this overarching assault on individualism. The narrative arc of Chesterton’s life is arranged so as to explain and justify the model of unoriginal originality or populist sagedom by which Chesterton defended his authority in essays like “The Last of the Rationalists.” Briefly, Chesterton is born into the common life, and grows up living among its traditions and ideals. In boyhood, he falls from this state into originality, individuality, skepticism, and solipsism. In adulthood, he recovers his belief in myths, traditions, and the common life and solidifies this position by joining the Catholic Church. He is consequently uniquely positioned to see the truth: he is original among famous writers for his belief in and understanding of the ideals of the masses, and he is original among the masses for his conversion to and resultant ability to articulate their ideals. It would be outside my scope and beyond my purposes to summarize in any great detail Chesterton’s life as the autobiography depicts it, but an outline of its three basic stages will serve to validate and flesh out my claims.

If Chesterton’s birth is a tradition, his childhood is a legend. “The very first thing [he] can ever remember seeing with [his] own eyes” is neither a member of his family, nor any part of their property, but “a fragment of a fairy play in a toy theatre” put together by his father (Chesterton *Autobiography* 39, 41). His first memory is of a cardboard prince with a “golden key” crossing a bridge to a castle in order to “release” a fair maiden “from captivity” to a wicked king (Chesterton *Autobiography* 39-40). This scene is a literal enactment of Chesterton’s claim in *Orthodoxy* that he knew and believed in “elfland” or “fairyland” before he knew and believed in the earth (49). Again, there is an important philosophical point to this apparent joke. In his autobiography and other
works, Chesterton depicts fairy tales as the current, truly popular versions of ancient legends. Therefore, as per the Chestertonian definition of a popular legend, fairy tales speak with the voice of “democracy and tradition,” and relate important truths about human nature (*Orthodoxy* 49). One of the most important truths that fairy tales teach is that every human action possesses meaning and that human nature is fixed and normative, and to be defended against any attempt to surpass or alter it (Chesterton “Wells” 41-43, *Orthodoxy* 49 ff., cf. *Autobiography* 51-52). He also consistently depicts the toy theatre as, due to the simplicity of its construction, the artistic means by which the essentials of mythic narrative are most effectively conveyed (cf. Chesterton *Autobiography* 40). In this childhood among archetypes, Chesterton lives in a solid and traditional world where the characters embody human nature as tradition has fixed it. He remembers this life among fairy tales as an “incredible paradise,” compared to which the “real happenings” of his individual human life lack reality, for the fairy tales embody a sort of Platonic form of life and human nature of which his life can at best serve as an instance (Chesterton *Autobiography* 40, 58, cf. 39).

Chesterton depicts his teen years as a fall from collective tradition into individualism and attempts at originality. This spiral begins with the desire to become an autonomous subject. Chesterton and his fellow schoolboy “snobs” posture as “gentlem[e]n of independent means” and attempt to conceal their origins (*Autobiography* 63). Any mark of interconnectedness with other people, such as “that each of us did in fact possess a family” “or even a Christian name” was treated as a “horrible” “secret” (Chesterton *Autobiography* 63). Living in an “agnostic” atmosphere, and a “desert of materialism,” the newly individualistic Chesterton also comes to reject the traditional
knowledge he learned from fairy tales and folklore (Chesterton *Autobiography* 140). As a consequence, Chesterton in 1936 feels sure that he “was a much wiser and wider-minded person at the age of six than at the age of sixteen” (*Autobiography* 60). This process reaches its apogee when after preparatory school he enters the Slade art school, where he lapses into the complete skepticism and solipsism that I have already discussed. He is deeply depressed and unproductive, and impressionistic thought only serves to solidify his “mood of unreality and sterile isolation” (Chesterton *Autobiography* 95). He postures as an artist but produces little art. The world seems devoid of meaning and he contemplates suicide.

In his adulthood, Chesterton shakes the dust of originality and individualism off of him and becomes an author. At his lowest point, he struggles to “throw off” the “nightmare” of “contemporary pessimism,” and comes up with his basic principle of the “mystical minimum” of fideistic belief (Chesterton *Autobiography* 96-97). Shortly thereafter, he drops out of art school. About that time, a sympathetic friend arranges for him to review a few art books for a magazine, and, as one unintended consequence leads to another, he finds himself a writer. In keeping with his general attack on the idea of the individualistic genius, he insists that his unplanned success (or even identity) as a writer was simply a case of “extraordinary luck” that is “still a mystery” to him (Chesterton *Autobiography* 102, 176-77). As he observes, “It was outrageously unjust that a man should succeed in becoming a journalist merely by failing to become an artist” (Chesterton *Autobiography* 102). This mystic, democrat, and, (accidental) author then becomes known as a literary genius and an eccentric simply because he travels in a turn of the century literary world in which “sceptic[s]” who “disbelieved in Man much more
than . . . in God” and who “despised democracy” were “not eccentric but centric” (Chesterton *Autobiography* 144). His career as a populist, traditionalist, and sage culminates in his conversion to Catholicism, which for Chesterton was the only institution that had synthesized all the traditional truths (of which any legitimate new truths are just rediscoveries or extensions) into a coherent whole (*Autobiography* 170).

Towards the end of the book Chesterton himself explicitly posits the pattern of bliss, fall, and restoration to a uniquely conscious faith that I have been sketching. Narratively, Chesterton sees an outdoor mass in Poland in the 1930s, and the pageantry and symbolism of the scene move him profoundly, “stirring strange double memories like a dream of the bridge in the puppet-show of [his] childhood” (*Autobiography* 307). More philosophically, Chesterton asserts that the “doctrines [of the Catholic Church] seem to link up my whole life from the beginning, as no other doctrines could do; and especially to settle simultaneously the two problems of my childish happiness and my boyish brooding” (*Autobiography* 320).

In relating his life, Chesterton has spun a complex web in which the Chesterbelloc attack can have no meaning. Here Chesterton stands for the masses, if not symbolically, then metonymically, since—unlike Shaw, Wells, or, as John Carey notes, the vast majority of early twentieth-century authors—he has deliberately affirmed the ties that bind him to the rest of humanity (Carey 52-54, cf. Purcell 212). Shaw’s second charge, that if Chesterton is connected to others, he lacks originality, is resolved in the higher paradox that forms the book’s narrative arc: what is original about Chesterton is that he is an intellectual who shares basic premises with the bulk of humanity and who—unlike Shaw with his Superman or Wells with his Samurai—affirms the mass of humanity as
In his autobiography, Chesterton achieves a unified self and coherent metaphysic only by accepting the worth and unity of humanity and human thought as a whole.

The autobiography’s strategy in addressing the Chesterbelloc controversy is simply an extension of the narrative logic of the work as a whole. In essence, the autobiography suggests that because Chesterton is bound to humanity en masse, logically he is also bound to Belloc. Chesterton even suggests that Belloc—ironically given his French origins and obsession with Spain—is the physical “symbo[l]” of the English masses (Autobiography 278). Chesterton alternately describes Belloc as looking “exactly like what all English farmers ought to look like” and as “the one . . . Englishman really looking like the traditional John Bull” (Autobiography 278). By writing the “Portrait of a Friend” chapter, he textually reenacts the Chesterbelloc charge, embedding Belloc—along with his many other friends—into his all-embracing textual self.

By the time the narrative is in full swing, Chesterton has so thoroughly reversed the connotations of the Chesterbelloc tag that he not only mentions it in print for the first time since the 1908 controversy in which the term originated, but also, to some extent, endorses it. Chesterton mentions the Chesterbelloc to conclude his account of his first meeting with Belloc. Given its significance, this passage is worth looking at in some detail. In keeping with the theme of interconnectedness, Chesterton stresses that he met Belloc through their mutual friends Lucian Oldershaw and Edward Clerihew Bentley, to whom Chesterton also dedicates books and a good number of pages of the autobiography (Autobiography 116). Hence, when Belloc enters the narrative—at a dinner with Chesterton and Oldershaw at cheap Soho restaurant—he enters as one of a horde of
people directly or indirectly attached to Chesterton, all of whom make him who he is. If Chesterton writes that his “friendship” with Belloc “has . . . played” a “considerable part in [his] life, public as well as private,” he speaks nearly as strongly of Bentley or his brother Cecil, and more strongly of his father (Autobiography 116). Since Chesterton is part of the whole of humanity, the charge that he and Belloc are in some sense a single being has no sting. Chesterton mentions the Chesterbelloc with some combination of endorsement and light mockery, as an obvious truth about which Shaw, in his lack of perspective, has been far too melodramatic. Chesterton writes in mock-Gothic horror, “from that dingy little Soho cafe, as from a cave of witchcraft . . . emerged the quadruped, the twiformed monster Mr. Shaw has nicknamed the Chesterbelloc” (Autobiography 118). It takes the whole structure of the autobiography to make this one joke work, and to justify the reversal of values it assumes.

Chesterton has now dealt with the Chesterbelloc, and, once he has fully solidified his authority against his other rivals (a process discussed in the remainder of this chapter), he will be free in the autobiography’s final pages to deprive Shaw of his sage status. He has thrown off Shaw’s interpretation of him, and can now interpret Shaw, explaining, for the first time in the autobiography, exactly why Shaw fails to be a true sage. I have already shown that in Chesterton’s autobiography—as in his short story, “How I Found the Superman,” where the Superman proves to be so radically different from all other creatures that he cannot survive in the earth’s atmosphere—the individualistic difference Shaw trumpets as both a mark of his authority and as a sign of the Superman prevents birth or fruition (cf. “How” 103). Near the end of the autobiography, we find that Shaw’s individualism also discredits him as a sage. In a
Chestertonian paradox, the reason that Chesterton is the one true sage of his time is that he is the only thinking man with enough sense not to think for himself. Every other major intellectual builds a system out of his “own precious fragment of truth”; consequently, as in Chesterton’s critique of the specialist, they miss many other truths and fail to unify human thought into a coherent and convincing whole (Autobiography 327). Only Chestertonian Catholicism recognizes “that almost any other theology or philosophy contains a truth” and still paradoxically synthesizes these truths into “the Truth, which is made of a million such truths and is yet one” (Autobiography 327). By contrast, Shaw’s individualism and stress on original discovery prevent his system from effectively explaining all of reality. If, “like Bernard Shaw,” Chesterton had indulged in individualism and the cult of the genius or superman, if “like Bernard Shaw” he “had wandered away . . . and made up [his] own philosophy out of [his] own precious fragment of truth, merely because [he] had found it for [him]self,” his thought would also have been erroneous (Autobiography 327). His lone truth, detached from the rest of human truth, would soon be “distorting itself into a falsehood” (Chesterton Autobiography 327). In a stunning reversal, Shaw fails to be a sage because he is unorthodox, inimitable, original; in short, because he fails to be the Chesterbelloc.

Chesterton’s recasting of the Chesterbelloc was a partial success. While the term is sometimes still applied to Chesterton in a damaging fashion, it also is often used by literary historians merely as an amusing nickname or even by fans of Chesterton and Belloc as a sort of team mascot. If the term has been evacuated of meaning to the point where it no longer seems inherently threatening, no book did more to produce this situation than Chesterton’s autobiography. Belloc and Shaw did not write
autobiographies, and Wells does not discuss the Chesterbelloc controversy in his two autobiographies, which left Chesterton the last word on the subject. As I have shown, this word was not wasted. However, Chesterton only partly defuses the threat of Shaw. Shaw remained, at the time of Chesterton’s death, at least equal in popularity to Chesterton. While Chesterton regains interpretive authority over his own life, the coherence of his universe is still troubled by the fact that millions of people believe in a rival sage with a rival view of human nature. Consequently, there is no definitive way to end their “long duel” (Chesterton Autobiography 215). In the autobiography, Chesterton narrowly escapes death as an author, but cannot himself kill Shaw.

III: Playing to the Gallery: Chesterton and the Threat of Modernism

Shaw may not be the greatest of Chesterton’s problems, however. With the rise of the modernists, the whole Chesterton-Shaw battle slowly begins to seem passé. Though they never possessed widespread popularity, the modernists, as self-styled literary professionals and eager delineators of their profession’s bounds, came to possess a good deal of cultural caché in era marked by an ascendant professional class (Trotter 9, cf. Perkin 395-98). By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the modernists exerted a great deal of influence on book reviewing and were fast-becoming the dominant force in literary criticism (Baldick 13). They were not effective at getting the public to accept their aesthetic (indeed, they did not desire public acceptance), but they were effective at persuading the reviewers and their public that certain authors and styles were out-of-date and, especially, Victorian. The sage discourse, most famously practiced by authors already known in the 1920s as the “Victorian prophets,” embodied much of that which the modernists held in contempt. Most modernists posited that the attempt to understand
the world and its inhabitants as parts of a meaningful whole was foolish or, at best, futile; most modernists posited that the attempt to persuade the populace to accept a common world view was self-falsifying or, at best, misguided. As Chesterton recognizes in his autobiography, the “strong sense of the absolute necessity of some significance in human life” on which the whole sage project depends was increasingly seen as one of many “Victorian” “vices” (*Autobiography* 139-40). Moreover, in a culture dominated by the ideal of the trained professional, the approval of the uneducated masses was coming to suggest not the legitimacy, but the falsity of a belief system. In the previous chapter, I have discussed these literary and cultural dynamics in some detail as they bear on H. G. Wells; they affect the other Edwardian sages as deeply.

By the time the 1920s had passed and the 1930s had begun, Shaw’s and Chesterton’s efforts to persuade the public to accept their philosophies seemed trivial and vastly outdated to many. Although Chesterton had risen to fame as part of the Edwardian literary reaction against late Victorian despair, in his autobiography he recognizes and accepts that by the standards of the 1930s, he is “a late Victorian” and there is “now a tendency to regard some Victorians as bores” (261). As the all-interpreting sage increasingly came to be seen as a failed specialist, reviewers increasingly belittled Chesterton for his refusal to specialize in one area of knowledge or one genre of writing (cf., for instance, Wolfe 360). Though exceptions were made for individual works, Chesterton’s contemporary biographers and reviewers generally depicted his literary talents as having peaked by 1914 (Conlon Introduction 17-18). West’s biography—with which, as I have shown, its subject possessed some familiarity—depicts Chesterton as having fallen into “certain intellectual weariness” in 1913; Bullett’s 1922 biography more
aggressively asserts that “it is certainly time he [Chesterton] was put in his place” (West 166, Bullett 1). Chesterton himself in his autobiography estimates that his audience peaked between 1903 and 1912 (19). While it would be inaccurate to say that Chesterton ever became unpopular—his Father Brown stories, *Illustrated London News* Column, and radio talks remained popular up until his death in 1936—after 1914 his literary, political, and religious influence progressively declined, and the nonfiction manifestos in which he outlined his faith were steadily less read. The last great moment of the Shaw/Chesterton battle was their final live debate in November 1927, which was nationally broadcast on the BBC and liberally reported in the newspapers (Furlong 133). Shaw mocked the audience as the debate started, cynically observing, “I suspect that you do not really care much what we debate about provided we entertain you by talking in our characteristic manners” (“Do We Agree” 540). In a similar vein, Chesterton in his autobiography describes their debates as on occasion seeming like “plattfor[m]” fights between “two knock-about comedians” (216).

Modernism made Chesterton, like the other major Edwardians, seem a Victorian anachronism, a fad whose day had passed. However, while Wells figures prominently in scholarly accounts of the quarrels between the modernists and Edwardians, Chesterton goes almost entirely ignored. The oversight is unfortunate, for Chesterton is central to these aesthetic skirmishes in two important ways. As one of the few Edwardians who employs an invariably populist rhetoric, he becomes a lightening rod for modernist contempt—especially Pound’s voracious contempt—of the masses. As perhaps the most prominent Edwardian literary critic and one of the last prominent impressionist critics, he becomes in the eyes of Eliot an important rival who must be overthrown if
their “scientific” school of literary criticism is to be soundly established. The modernists pose an equally large problem for Chesterton, as they question both the value of speaking for the masses and the desirability (or even the possibility) of speaking to the masses as a whole. Although, for reasons I will discuss, Chesterton does not explicitly narrate his conflicts with Pound and Eliot in his autobiography, he constructs his autobiographical authority as much in relation to modernism as in relation to his rival sages.

The battle between Chesterton and the modernists was contested over two closely connected issues—the nature of the masses and the nature of the author’s relation to the reading public. As both issues deeply affect Chesterton’s autobiography, I shall consider each in turn. To clarify the modernist side of the equation, I will summarize, without greatly complicating, a good deal of recent criticism on the modernists’ relation to the masses. Following in part Nietzsche, many modernists—especially Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis—consider the mass of people to be an animalistic, unthinking herd that is easily manipulated by its only slightly less ignorant rulers. Pound believes that oratory and oratorical literature—really, any writing that is obviously focused on the audience, from purple poetry to magazine articles and popular novels—are corrupt by nature and serve only to manipulate the masses. By exploiting the emotionally persuasive and oral elements of speech, such literature by-passes the intellect and triggers primal emotions and automatic physical responses to auditory stimuli, thereby producing an extreme and dangerous level of identification between the speaker/writer and the listeners/readers (Sherry Ezra 17, 53-54). As the listeners/readers pass into this state of identification with the author/speaker, they lose their individuality and agency and become possessed by a
herd mentality, a collective consciousness that destroys all critical or original thought (Sherry Ezra 4, 53-54).

For Pound, Eliot and most other modernists, the basest form of oratorical literature is journalism, an audience-focused, profit-driven genre deliberately designed to confirm the masses in their worst instincts and lead them to despise good writing (Carey 7, Morrison 97). The newspaper serves as a metonym for the masses in much modernist literature (Carey 21). The modernists, especially Pound, seem to possess little hope that the masses could possibly be redeemed or even desire to be redeemed from their herdlike state. The goal of much modernist thought and writing is to help an “intellectual aristocracy” of select souls escape the process of massification and live self-aware, intellectually transcendent lives (Carey 71-72). Pound pursued this goal as poetry editor of the Little Review by self-avowedly selecting only work that was “an insult to the public-library, the general-reader, [and] the weekly-press” (“To Jepson” 112).

Unsurprisingly, Pound, Eliot, and the majority of modernists favored non-democratic systems of government, though the precise form varied from Nazism to Francoism to Stalinism (Perkin 342, Carey 52).

Since Chesterton was both a well-known journalist and a flamboyantly rhetorical poet, it was perhaps inevitable that the modernists would develop a loathing for him. Early in his career, Pound immortalized his hatred of Chesterton in the Personae poem “The New Cake of Soap,” whose implied premise is that Chesterton is the huckster salesman of a huckster literature (“The New Cake of Soap,” cf. “Retrospect 6”).  In 1919 an article by Pound in the New Age triggered a direct literary conflict between Pound and Chesterton. The Pound/Chesterton quarrel nicely clarifies the modernists’
problem with Chesterton, and vice-versa. While the purported subject of argument was the nature of the Crusades, on both sides the real issue was, quite explicitly, the nature of the masses. Although harshly critical of religion, Pound’s essay attacks historians who blame the Crusades on religious fanaticism, on the grounds that this position attributes too high a level of volition to the masses. Pound argues that neither the orators who inspired the Crusades nor the masses who fought in them were actually in control of their actions; rather, the orators spoke and the masses responded under the influence of an animalistic “nomad instinct” that prompted them towards mass migration (“Pastiche” 358). Pound complains that little has changed since “the thirteenth century”—the orators are still in charge, the wise ignored, and animal nature still on top—and calls for an abandonment of democracy to guard against war (“Pastiche” 358). “Universal peace will never be maintained unless it be by a conspiracy of intelligent men” (Pound “Pastiche” 358).

Chesterton soon replied to Pound. He quickly cuts to the heart of the issue, dubbing Pound’s article an attack on “the intellectual dignity of man” as a species (Chesterton New Jerusalem 219). Chesterton asserts that the Crusades were a “popular” movement, and that modern intellectuals mock the Crusades because they “regar[d]” “anything really resembling the movement of a mass of angry men . . . as no better than a stampede of bulls or a scurry of rats. The new sociologists call it the herd instinct, just as the old reactionaries called it the many-headed beast, both agree the masses don’t count” (New Jerusalem 225). He insists that Pound cannot meaningfully separate himself from the mass of humanity, and proceeds to evaluate Pound on his own terms. Chesterton jokes that if the masses migrate simply because of instinct and impulse, it is equally
likely that some “dim tribal tendency” towards “nomadism” caused Pound to migrate first from America to England, then from his house to the pillar box to mail the *New Age* his article (Chesterton *New Jerusalem* 219).

In this debate, the key issue between the modernists and Chesterton becomes plain: Does the favor of the masses mean anything? Do the masses possess intellect and volition and, thereby, authority? Or do the masses possess only a destructive and irrational herd instinct? If the masses possess authority, the basic assumptions of modernist literature do not hold, and this unpopular literary style loses any claim to significance. If the masses are devoid of agency and authority, the basic assumptions of Chesterton’s philosophical system do not hold, and his work loses any claim to validity.42

As I have already implied, the second primary issue between Chesterton and the modernists, the relation of author to audience, stems from the first issue, the nature of the masses. The modernists as a whole desire to liberate authors from their audience-consciousness, as audience-consciousness inevitably leads to oratorical writing. Pound, especially, desperately wishes to save poetry from oratory and thereby from the mob. In his not-so-subtly-titled essay “The Constant Preaching to the Mob,” Pound attempts to refute the common idea that English poetry is in its origins popular and entertainment-oriented. He rants, “Such poems [as “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer”] are not made for after-dinner speakers . . . Still it flatters the mob to tell them that their importance is so great that the . . . lordliest of arts was created for their amusement” (“Constant” 65). In his essay “Religion and Literature,” Eliot warns of the dangers of the author being aware of his or her readers. He judges the only truly literary religious writing to be that which is “unconsciously Christian,” displaying no awareness of its audience’s faith or

Modernist verse as Pound designed it is largely constructed as a means of avoiding the pitfalls of mass communication. As Vincent Sherry notes, Remy de Gourmont, a major influence on Pound, so associated the oral elements of poetry with the irrational mass response to oratory that he thought that modern poetry should avoid musical effects like assonance, alliteration, or rhyme (Ezra 22). Instead, Pound (and, to a lesser extent, Eliot) advocates a complicatedly imagistic free verse written to be read by a hypothetical ideal audience (cf. Gross Rise 234-45). A poem written in such a manner yields its meaning only to the properly educated, highly intelligent reader who can successfully connect its partly obscured pattern of images into a coherent whole; a poem written in such a manner gives the masses no music to entertain and delude them (Sherry Ezra 53, 5, 25). As Carey notes, if the masses cannot be excluded from literacy, they can at least be excluded from literature (16-17, cf. Perkin 396, Baldick 206, Gross Rise 269-70). Tradition also becomes defined so as to correspond with this view of literature. In contrast to Chesterton’s “democracy extended through time,” Eliot’s tradition refers to the current artist’s appropriation of past high art; for Eliot, tradition is oligarchy extended through time (cf. Eliot “Tradition” 4-5).

Modernist criticism helps the artist evade the mass audience by invalidating its reading methods, and establishing a select corps of properly trained readers as the true audience of any literary work. As has often been noted, the modernists’ “scientific”
approach to literary criticism functions especially as a means of establishing the literary "specialist" or "professional"’s reading of a text as normative, and the response of the common reader as incorrect or false (Pound “Serious Artist” 48, Eliot “Professional” 61, cf. Baldick 1). T. S. Eliot was the central figure in creating the methodology and the rhetoric of this new school of criticism, though its roots went back to Henry James (cf. Gross Rise 234-35). Since Eliot’s critical method involves treating the language and dominant images of a text as “facts,” then rearranging these facts into a coherent pattern to yield new meaning—a meaning without reference to the text’s historical context or audience—it replicates the very means by which modernist poetry sought to avoid the masses, the emphasis on the image and exclusion of rhetorical concerns (see esp. Eliot’s “Function of Criticism” essay, pgs. 19-25, cf. also James’s “Science of Criticism” 290). Eliot’s criticism is written to be read by “a tiny hypothetical elite” and soon produced an elite to read it (Gross Rise 234-35). The New Critics were immediately influential among artists and shortly among professors, creating a small but prestigious demand for writing that violates the public’s general aesthetic (cf. Gross Rise 269-70, Perkin 396). As many literary historians have noted, the methods of modernist criticism and literature guarantee a divided literary culture.

Chesterton was soon attacking the modernist critique of the mass audience, elaborating on his own theories of the relation between author and audience in response to it. As I have shown, Chesterton considers truly popular literature—literature whose popularity, like that of the work of Dickens, is widespread, extratextual, and long-enduring—to be modern legends or folk tales that truly represent the beliefs of the masses, the beliefs of the masses to be a window into human nature, and human nature to
be a key to understanding the world. Hence mass literature has potential and, at times, actual epistemological value, and the literati’s “ignorance and contempt” for it can only prevent them from understanding reality (cf. Coates Crisis 59, Chesterton Robert 97).

Conversely, the “fiction” praised by many twentieth-century critics is the production of “specialist[s]” in a specialized society and consequently tells us nothing about the life of “common” people or about life itself (Chesterton Charles 86-87). There is, Chesterton asserts, “a fundamental contrast between what is called fiction and what is called folklore” (Charles 86). Dickens spoke to and for the masses, but James Joyce “is talking to himself” (Chesterton “Spirit of the Age” 608).

Since literature is validated or invalidated by the masses’ collective reader response, for the later Chesterton all literature should be rhetorical, carefully considering and appealing to its audience. For example, he thinks that “All poetry is like oratory” in that if a poem does not produce the desired effect on an average audience “no critical arguments afterwards can prevent it from being” a “bad” poem (Chesterton “Middleman” 614). The “Imagists” who exalt the “image” and shun the “hymn[ic]” music of verse are a case in point (Chesterton “On the New Poetry” 39). Their poetry has proved unpopular with the masses, which suggests that “the old conventions of verse” as regards “rhythm” “rested upon instincts” of “psychology” or “physiology” which are deeply embedded in human nature and cannot, must not, be abolished (Chesterton “On Sense” 105). Imagist poetry—by which Chesterton seems to mean all the poetry to which we now refer as modernist; in the 1930s he identifies Pound as a leading Imagist—is therefore a metaphysically worthless mistake (cf. “On the New Poetry” 44). He blames the modernist critics for abetting and in some ways creating a literary scene that allows poets
to be deaf to the populace. Chesterton complains that because the sympathetic New Critics are willing to “protect the [experimental] poet from the public,” the poet now neglects his “true function” of “making himself [generally] understood,” and instead writes for the “club or clique” of like-minded critics (“Middleman” 615, 618, “On Literary Cliques” 110). High literature thus becomes a subculture and a culturally divisive force. The end result, as Chesterton notes with some concern in “On the New Poetry,” is that “just as the whole of human culture has been combination, so the whole of the new world of culture is separation” (41).

As the differences between Chesterton and the modernists concerning the nature of the masses came to a head in his conflicts with Pound, the differences concerning the author’s relation to the audience come to a head in a conflict with Eliot. Eliot considered Chesterton’s work to partake of oratory and therefore fail to be literature. In a review of Chesterton’s book Robert Louis Stevenson, entitled, “There Must Be People Who Like It,” Eliot deems “Mr. Chesterton’s style exasperating to the last point of endurance” (444). Eliot’s primary difficulty with Chesterton’s style is that Chesterton wishes to reach and reeducate a wide variety of readers, and explicitly imagines and addresses his readers’ preconceptions and patterns of logic. Eliot finds Chesterton’s openly rhetorical approach to writing annoying and condescending. Eliot laments that if only Chesterton—who is “not at all stupid”—would write exclusively for himself and thereby also “for the best people everywhere” he might write something worthwhile (Rev. of Robert 445). However, Eliot implies, Chesterton will likely continue to annoy and to condescend.

Chesterton replied to Eliot’s attack on the oratorical character of his writing in “An Apology for Buffoons,” published seven months later. The essay’s opening is
unpromising. Chesterton has come across a reviewer “who quoted Mr. T. S. Eliot as saying” that Chesterton’s “style maddened him to the point of unendurance” (“Apology” 341). However, either Chesterton or the reviewer has distorted his source, and Chesterton seems to think that Eliot considers his style contemptible because of its overuse of alliteration. But, bizarrely, this sizable error soon proves irrelevant. Since, as I have shown, early twentieth century authors tended to associate alliteration with oratory, within a few pages Chesterton has dropped the subject of alliteration and moved on to defending the element of his work that Eliot had actually attacked, the oratorical nature of his writing.

Chesterton insists that his alliteration, jokes, and style in general can be justified as necessary elements of any writing that hopes to reach an audience. These rhetorical devices are a legitimate part of a style of direct popular appeal, the style “of the demagogue or of the buffoon or of the popular minstrel or of the orator” (Chesterton “Apology” 346). His writing has “vulgarities” because it is “a speech and not a soliloquy” (Chesterton “Apology” 353). On what retrospectively seems a somewhat postmodern note, Chesterton insists that since all literature is rhetorical, openly rhetorical writing is less manipulative of the reader than writing that masks or suppresses its rhetorical appeals. For this reason, “buffoonery” is more “sporting” than high literature (“Apology” 349-51). Saying briefly what I have attempted to demonstrate at some length, Chesterton asserts that he is willing to be a “buffoon” precisely because he is a “dogmatist”; he “make[s] jokes and play[s] to the gallery” because “there is something more than a joke for him in the phrase which calls the gallery the gods” (“Apology” 353).
Humor in particular, Chesterton observes, is the great justification of his position; in contrast to modernist obscurity, “the whole case for buffoons is that jokes ought to be obvious” (Chesterton “Apology” 355). Helped along by the generally socially divisive nature of the modern world, the modernist literary “cliques” that “encouag[e] the artist to be unintelligible . . . . to the mass of men” are gradually causing a disastrous social and psychological “schism” (Chesterton “Apology” 355). As the social classes are ceasing to have any culture or values in common, “the common human mind” is gradually “breaking up” into “disparate psychologies . . . incommunicable or at least without communication between one and another” (Chesterton “Apology” 355). Humor is perhaps the primary remaining type of speech that appeals to all types and classes, and allows a “direct relation between the maker and mankind”; everyone likes a joke, and a joke is no good if no one gets it (Chesterton “Apology” 356, cf. Chaucer 309). A number of contemporary literary critics, most notably James English, have theorized humor as a community-building activity, and in doing so have offered an account of humor that clarifies and is analogous with Chesterton’s. English argues that humor creates a community by defining an in-group and an out-group, by creating and enforcing the norms of a dominant culture or of a counter-culture. For English, “our laughter is always the laughter of the group” and a joke does the work of a joke only if the listener, by laughing, seems to accept the group identification the joke demands (9, 13).43 He asserts that “humor seeks to shore up identifications and solidarities” in a culture that, as the assumption of an in-group and an out-group implies, is actually deeply divided (English 10). Through his humor, Chesterton seeks to “shore up” what little collective identification remains in a deeply divided culture; the butts of his jokes are usually the
intellectual and literary elite whom he considers to have divided British culture into rival enclaves, and his jokes conscript the disempowered majority—and even, Chesterton hopes, any members of the elite afraid of seeming unable to take a joke—into a momentary unity, as they laugh at the follies of the elite.

Chesterton’s coda to “An Apology for Buffoons” both explains the philosophical and rhetorical foundation for his stress on humor and ascribes a metaphysical significance to one of the most debased forms of humor, the after-dinner speech:

To make what is now called a popular speech it is indeed necessary to make it only too like what is called an after-dinner speech; to keep our connection with the normal life only by a thin thread of flippancy. . . . It is not altogether our [the buffoons’] fault if a chasm has opened in the community of beliefs and social traditions, which can only be spanned by the far haloo of the buffoon. (Chesterton “Apology” 356)

Sage writing is an attempt to unite a whole culture under a common metaphysical belief system. In this clash with Eliot, Chesterton sees in the modernists a threat to the very possibility of addressing the culture as a whole, and, thereby, a threat to the very possibility of a common human nature.

Modernism is a serious problem for Chesterton’s authority. The modernists never question Chesterton’s right to represent the masses, but they radically question whether representing the masses can serve as a basis for any authority whatever. To the modernists, Chesterton’s association with the populace makes him not a prophet, but either a destructive literary force that deserves death or even death itself. Pound most forcibly expresses the point. Chesterton is “a symbol for all the mob’s hatred of all art that aspires above mediocrity”; he “is so much the mob, so much the multitude” that if one could literally “kil[l]” him it would “purg[e] one’s soul” (“To John Quin” 116). In a
survey of the literary scene, Eliot declares that he has “seen the forces of death with Mr. Chesterton at their head upon a white horse” (“Observations” 69). As Chesterton complains in 1929, “many modern critics have passed from the proposition that a masterpiece may be unpopular to the other proposition that unless it is unpopular it cannot be a masterpiece” (“On Detective Novels” 2).

However much Chesterton may disdain these intellectuals, their critical dominance is such that even Chesterton himself calls the 1930s “the Ezra Pound period” in literature (“Spirit of the Age” 605-6, cf. Baldick 13). And through this critical dominance the modernists have a significant impact on public perception and literary reputation. If in his autobiography Chesterton worries that he now seems an out-of-date Victorian, Eliot, by all accounts the most influential critic of the 1920s and 1930s, has stated or implied that Chesterton is a Victorian over and over again (Eliot Rev. of Outline 71, “Professional” 61, Sacred Wood xiii-xiv). For Eliot, anyone who jumbles social reform, literary criticism, and totalistic philosophy—in others words, any sage—is a literary “non-professiona[l]” and a Victorian (Eliot “Professional” 61, cf. “Studies” 114, Sacred Wood xiii-xiv, Rev. of Robert 444-45). Since, unlike Carlyle’s battles with Disraeli or Chesterton’s own battles with Shaw, Chesterton’s conflicts with Pound and Eliot never attracted much attention in the literary world or in the newspapers, Chesterton is not compelled to narrate these conflicts in his autobiography to preserve or regain his authority. But since the modernists’ assumption that mass popularity is self-discrediting entirely nullifies Chesterton’s vision of authorship, his autobiography must address this assumption if it is to serve as a defense of his authority at all.
In his autobiography, Chesterton attempts to vindicate himself and his remaining readers against the modernist critique primarily by recasting modernism’s separation from mass culture as the result of the mass’s rejection of modernism, rather than vice-versa. Several significant aspects of Chesterton’s autobiographical depiction of his authorship should be understood in this context. The basic story of Chesterton’s authorship—that he becomes an author accidentally, and does so concurrently with the collapse of his individualism—implicitly attacks the cult of the solitary genius on which both the elitist sages Wells and Shaw and the modernists Eliot and Pound staked their claims to literary authority. The autobiography’s continual, and at times seemingly irrelevant, asides in favor of the masses against the elite also do rhetorical triple-duty against the Open Conspiracy, the Life Force, and the Discerning Reader (cf. 225, etc.). The autobiography’s insistence—reminiscent of Wells’s autobiography—that Chesterton “always has been and presumably always shall be a journalist” and is “not . . . able to be a novelist” loudly associates him with popular writing and aligns him against its detractors (276, 277). The autobiography’s depiction of the better journalism and fairy tales as genuinely popular genres, and modern novels and poetry as in most cases metaphysically valueless continues this theme (cf. 54, 326). But, unquestionably, as in “An Apology for Buffoons,” humor is Chesterton’s primary tactic against the modernists. An “Apology for Buffoons” was first printed in book form in 1935, as Chesterton was working on his autobiography, and the autobiography explicitly constructs Chesterton’s authorship in terms of the essay, dubbing him the “buffoon” who “champion[es]” “the mob” (247, cf. Masie Ward 646). The autobiography often favors the mass’s cutting humor over the seriousness Chesterton associates with the pretentious literary productions of the elite.
For instance, Chesterton considers “the humor of an omnibus conductor” to be “a much more powerful and real thing than most modern forms of education or eloquence” (124, cf. 247). That this praise of the mass’s humor also suggests a criticism of the culturally isolated high modernism of Pound and other serious artists is made more or less explicit when Chesterton lauds “popular humor” as “perhaps our only really popular institution” (*Autobiography* 31).

However, Chesterton’s autobiographical rhetoric against the modernists is not conducted exclusively through asides and implications. In several key points, Chesterton directly narrates his dealings with the modernists. I have already mentioned that Chesterton’s literary quarrels with the modernists attracted relatively little public attention, especially in comparison with the level of public interest in his quarrels with Shaw. But, by 1935 and 1936, when Chesterton wrote the bulk of his autobiography, his personal encounters with one major modernist *had* already been widely publicized. As I have shown in my previous chapter, Wells’s *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) made hundreds of thousands of readers familiar with Chesterton’s dealing with Henry and William James. In fact, Chesterton himself can be counted among the readers and reviewers of Wells’s *Experiment in Autobiography*; in a November 28, 1934 BBC broadcast he discussed the volume alongside and in contrast with, interestingly, Ezra Pound’s *Make It New* and Wyndham Lewis’s *Men Without Art* (Chesterton “Nothing to Shout” 921). Significantly, in his autobiography Chesterton most explicitly defends his authority against the modernists through narrating his relations with Henry James, which, he grants, are a matter of “public interest” (205).
As I have discussed in my chapter on H. G. Wells, James and Chesterton are in many ways good foils to use in describing the modernist/Edwardian literary conflict. James’s novels and literary theories serve as foundational text for the modernists, and he possesses their contempt for mass literature. In his critical essays, James blames the vast influence of “contemporary journalism” for the poor state of the “art of criticism” and the art of novel writing in “the great common-schooled newspaper democracy” that England has become (“Science of Criticism” 290, “The Question” 328). In a letter to his brother William, Henry James groups Chesterton with Wells as two of the only figures in “the younger ‘literary’ generation . . . presenting any interest whatever,” but suggests that Chesterton is “too . . . journalistic” to ultimately amount to anything (“To William James” 425).

As we might expect given Chesterton and James’s respective beliefs, in *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* their meeting serves to refute the modernist aesthetic. The episode begins when, as part of his exhaustive “search for the finest shades among the shadows of the past,” James decides that an “old oak-panelled mansion” in Rye can serve as the finest embodiment of English tradition and, therefore, as his place of residence (Chesterton *Autobiography* 205). Like Eliot and Pound, James is “an American who had reacted against America”—especially, it seems, against American democracy—and who thinks that he has come to embody the “aristocrati[c]” “traditions” of the English (Chesterton *Autobiography* 205, 210). As Chesterton’s language suggests, this mansion serves as a synecdoche for James’s appropriation of English high culture as a whole, and he takes charge of it just as fastidiously as the American modernists had taken charge of the English literary tradition (*Autobiography* 210). The house, once the “seat
of a considerable patrician family,” is something of a cultural monument, and James, who
“regard[s] himself as a sort of steward or custodian” of its “mysteries and secrets,”
worships it as the symbol of a vanished aristocracy (Chesterton Autobiography 205-8).
James acts as the lackey of this hypothetical aristocracy, and guards the building with the
“oppressive delicacy of a highly cultured family butler” (Chesterton Autobiography 208).

As in a modern sit-com, the “comedy” begins when Chesterton rents the house
next door, and James for the first time encounters actual English traditions, which, of
course, are democratic, lower or middle class, and entirely offensive to James’s highly
refined aesthetic (Autobiography 210). James’s first encounter with real Englishness is
related in a “legend” Chesterton hears while living in the neighborhood (Autobiography
210). Chesterton “never learned for certain if it [the legend] was true,” but relates the
story as perfectly symbolizing James’s philosophy and state of mind (Autobiography
208). As the tale goes, James became so obsessed with his British mansion that he
“traced the dead family-tree” of the house’s original inhabitants and, by right of lineage if
not possession, true owners (Chesterton Autobiography 208). James finally discovered
“that there was far away in some manufacturing town, one unconscious descendant of the
family, who was a cheerful and commonplace commercial clerk” (Chesterton
Autobiography 208). “To render . . . an account of his stewardship” of the house of
culture, James then invites the clerk/heir to his Rye mansion (Chesterton Autobiography
208).

As John Carey notes in his chapter “The Suburbs and the Clerks,” the clerk
typically functions in early twentieth-century literature—most famously in The Waste
Land—as a symbol of the newly educated masses (see esp. 57-60). The figure of the
clerk combines stereotypes of the lower- and middle-classes into a single repulsive being who embodies all the worst tends of twentieth-century popular culture. The clerks are self-confident, anti-intellectual, rude to their superiors, and, worst of all, fond of mass market periodicals (Carey 58-59). So it should not surprise us, though it does surprise James, that the visit does not go as planned. James’s conversation, like his fiction, is overly refined and somewhat needlessly obscure, “split[ting]” “thin straws of sympathy and subtlety” while “feel[ing] its way through a forest of [“often invisible”] facts” (Chesterton Autobiography 208). On this occasion at least, James fails to communicate with the average reader not because he possesses a theory of literature that prohibits the attempt, but because he is simply unable to talk to a normal person. As a consequence, the clerk, the true heir of British culture, “thought the visit a great bore and the ancestral home a hell of a place” and “probably . . . long[ed] to go out for a B and S and the Pink’Un” (Chesterton Autobiography 208). The Pink’Un was a nickname for the popular London weekly magazine the Sporting Times, which featured humor and sports reports, and it serves here as a figure for both English popular humor and for Chesterton’s own work. (cf. Autobiography 92). Nineteen pages before the start of the James episode, Chesterton describes his own serio-comic journalistic style as the practice of writing sporting essays for the Church Times and theological essays for the Sporting Times (Autobiography 176). The moral of this quite amusing story, then, is clear: the masses are the true owners of the traditions of British literature, they are unhappy with the modernists’ stewardship of their possession, they are abandoning British literary culture out of contempt for modernism, and they truly desire mass—by extension, Chesterton’s—literature.
Chesterton’s second story regarding Henry James is an account of their meeting which, if it varies greatly from the details of Wells’s narrative of Chesterton’s relations with the James brothers, draws substantially the same conclusion from the encounter. Chesterton’s encounter with James as it is told here structurally and thematically doubles the clerk’s encounter; the primary difference is that the state of contemporary literature is now the story’s explicit topic. James visits Chesterton, and quickly turns the conversation into a discussion “about the best literature of the day” (*Autobiography* 209). As Chesterton is “nervous” and unwilling or unable to contest James’s critical terms, this discussion quickly becomes a Jamesian lecture in which the Edwardian sages are tried according to the lofty standards of his proto-modernist aesthetic and found wanting (*Autobiography* 209). James preaches his “strict . . . rules of artistic arrangement” and illustrates these principles by “deploring” the “practically formless” writing of “Bernard Shaw” (*Chesterton Autobiography* 209). In light of Chesterton’s preceding story, it seems telling that, as Carey notes, Shaw was one of the writers most “recognized as catering for the clerks” and “had . . . worked as a clerk himself” (58-59).

As Wells prefers even Chesterton to James, so Chesterton, despite his quarrels with Shaw, balks at the severity of James’s critique. The Edwardian sages each have a keen sense of how easily the social and philosophical universe could break apart and almost invariably have more sympathy for each other than for their modernist rivals. Still, Chesterton is polite to James and holds his tongue. But matters just get worse when, having disposed of Shaw, James moves on to Chesterton himself. James pays Chesterton a couple of quick and superficial compliments, but in classic Jamesian fashion his weightiest compliment is left-handed. Chesterton relates both the explicit accolade
and the implicit affront. “He represented himself as respectfully wondering how I wrote all I did. I suspected him of meaning why rather than how” (Chesterton Autobiography 209). After snubbing Chesterton’s journalistic excesses, James next directs his seemingly unstoppable and interminable critical juggernaut on the popular novelist Hugh Walpole. But just when James seems to have divested the Edwardian sages from the ranks of the literati, and just when Chesterton seems to have become as bored by James as the clerk himself, the lecture is suddenly interrupted by a voice from outside the house “bellowing . . . Gilbert! Gilbert! . . . . [and] shouting for bacon and beer” (Autobiography 209). Belloc has arrived.

Belloc had been hiking around France with a friend and “by some miscalculation they had found themselves in the middle of their travels entirely [later, Chesterton more accurately says “practically”] without money” (Autobiography 210). They had just enough for a subsistence diet and channel crossing. Belloc, who “is legitimately proud of having on occasion lived, and being able to live, the life of the poor,” was equal to the situation and they did indeed make it back to England, though much the worse for wear (Chesterton Autobiography 210). By the time Belloc staggers into Chesterton’s home at Rye, he has neither shaved nor bathed in quite some time, his clothes have “collapsed” and have been traded for “workmen’s slops,” and he desperately needs food and an alcoholic beverage (Autobiography 210). Looking like a workman, even a like “tram[p],” Belloc unexpectedly “burst[s] in upon the balanced tea-cup and tentative sentence of Mr. Henry James” and entirely disrupts the hellish gathering (Chesterton Autobiography 210). The isolated artist cannot successfully protect himself from the life of the poor.
Lest we, like James, should “miss the irony of the best comedy in which he [James] ever played a part,” Chesterton spells out for us the story’s punch line and moral (Autobiography 210). Like Pound and Eliot, James “had left America because he loved Europe, and all that was meant by England or France,” and to James, Europe means “the traditions” and “oak-panelled rooms” of “the gentry” (Chesterton Autobiography 210). In the course of Chesterton’s autobiography, Belloc functions as a figure for both “English rhetoric” with its “direct popular appeal” and, as we have seen, for the English masses with their rough and ready virtues (286). He represents the populist elements of the English literary tradition, and at the moment when James meets him he looks like a workman or a tramp. James looks across the “tea-table” at an utterly filthy Belloc with horror and ineffable condescension (Chesterton Autobiography 210). But what James is really seeing—and condescending to—at that moment is “Europe, [is] the old thing that made France and England, the posterity of the English squires and the French soldiers; ragged, unshaven, shouting for beer, shameless above all shades of poverty or wealth; sprawling, indifferent, secure” (Chesterton Autobiography 210).

Chesterton claims he “could write books about” the “significance” of this “comedy,” but primarily this is a comedy about the nature of “England” and, by implication, of English literature (Autobiography 205). In Chesterton’s socially leveling comedy of manners, the joke is that James’s rebellion against American democracy has been futile and illusory. The “irony” that James “miss[es]” is that if he were to really accept English tradition, he would also have to accept the English vox populi and popular literature (Chesterton Autobiography 210). James’s vision of British letters misunderstands the true nature of tradition—as we have seen, in Chestertonian thought
tradition is democratic—and consequently has been no more than a pipe dream. Like Pound, he cannot escape his own human, even American nature; to reject the masses is to reject one’s own humanity and to pass into unreality. Chesterton suggests that James and the modernists may without birthright occupy the mansion of culture and letters, but this fortress, besieged by popular periodicals like the Pink’Un and invaded by popular sages like Belloc, cannot hold out. Even their position at the moment is a bit ridiculous. They understand neither democracy nor a good joke. The modernists try to exclude too much from their world for their influence on culture to last.

Some seventy pages later, while describing a gathering held in honor of Belloc’s birthday, Chesterton offers a vision of the house of literature properly run. In this series of three stories, the modernists are progressively diminished as a cultural force. First, they are in control of the culture, although under siege by the popular periodicals represented by the Pink’Un; then, their fortress is invaded by the popular sages and the masses represented in the figure of Belloc; now, the Edwardian sages rule over literature, with Chesterton in the chair and Belloc as the guest of honor. In Belloc’s euphoric birthday dinner, each of Chesterton’s defenses of his authority against Shaw and the modernists come together and coalesce. The dinner concludes the “Portrait of a Friend” chapter, in which, as I have mentioned, Chesterton embeds Belloc into his textual self, recapitulating and reversing the Chesterbelloc charge. The dinner is also a picture of the Chesterbelloc regnant, with Belloc as the guest of honor and Chesterton in “the chair” (Autobiography 288). We quickly know that this dinner will prove important to an autobiography that uses humor as a source of authority, for Chesterton opens his narrative of the evening by informing us that it was “one of the most amusing events of [his] life”
We should also remember that Pound and Chesterton have both used the after-dinner speech as a metaphor for literature that attempts to please the audience, and formal dinners tend to lead to after-dinner speeches. At times, in fact, the dinner seems to be the autobiography itself; as Chesterton recounts, “Men of many groups known to me at many times, all appeared together as a sort of resurrection,” and “the renewed comradeship stirred in me the memory of a hundred controversies” (288).

Like the autobiography as a whole, this dinner is very concerned with the relation of author and audience. At the beginning of the dinner, Chesterton is placed in the position of a conventionally individualistic autobiographer. None of the guests at the dinner are allowed to speak, “only [Chesterton], as presiding, was permitted to say a few words” (Autobiography 289). “There were to be no speeches” (Chesterton Autobiography 289). This arrangement breaks down just as Chesterton breaks down autobiography’s individualistic premises in the work’s opening pages. “Towards the end of the dinner somebody” reminds Chesterton, that while he may be presiding over the event, he did not bring it into being; he should say a word to thank the person “who was supposed to have arranged the affair” (Autobiography 289).

The series of after-dinner speeches that followed entirely befuddles any notion of a division between author and audience. Properly enough, Chesterton “briefly thanked” the person responsible for the dinner and the person responsible for the dinner “briefly thanked” him (Autobiography 289). At this point one would have expected the authority to speak to simply return to Chesterton, but nothing so simple happened. Instead, this curiously unnamed figure kept talking and “added that it [the credit he was receiving] was quite a mistake, because the real author of the scheme was [the journalist] Johnnie
Morton . . . who sat immediately on his right” (Autobiography 289). Taking this cue, Morton insisted that though he authored the scheme he could not take credit for it, for the man seated to his right, the newspaper editor J. C. Squire, had “inspired him with this grand conception of a banquet for Belloc” (Chesterton Autobiography 289-90). Squire, in turn explains, that his role as inspiration for the event is not that impressive, for he was himself inspired by A. P. Herbert, “the true and deep and ultimate inspiration of the great idea” (Chesterton Autobiography 290). The authorship, authority and inspiration to which serious writers cling are being passed around the table like a hot potato, and “by this time, the logic of the jest was in full gallop and could not be restrained; even if [Chesterton] had wished to restrain it” (Chesterton Autobiography 290). Herbert credits Duff Cooper with the idea, Cooper blames it on Chesterton’s old friend Bentley, Bentley says in all things he acts “exclusively on the opinion of Professor Eccles,” Eccles claims to have been “mistaken for the man next to him . . . and so by fatal and unaltering steps, the whole process went round the whole table,” person by person, back to Chesterton (Autobiography 290-91).

The dinner party serves as an apotheosis of the autobiography’s dominant model of Chesterton as an author. The authority to speak begins with and returns to Chesterton, but in the mean time, counter to all individualistic expectations but exactly in the spirit of Chestertonian Catholicism, “every single human being ha[s] made a speech” (Autobiography 291). As I have discussed, for Chesterton comedy is the primary remaining communal form of literature, and the after-dinner speech is a symbol for literature that actually respects and tries to communicate with the audience. It is therefore only symbolically right that a communal dinner in honor of the Chesterbelloc
should end with a superlative series of comic after-dinner speeches. As Chesterton writes, “It is the only dinner I have ever attended, at which it was literally true that every diner made an after-dinner speech” (Chesterton Autobiography 291). These after-dinner speeches perfectly, almost supernaturally embody the Chestertonian model of authorship that I have been analyzing—the author is the audience and the audience the author, making miscommunication or false representation impossible. It is not surprising that the event puts Chesterton in an apocalyptic mood, that it reminds him of the “Day of Judgment” or “a sort of resurrection” (Autobiography 288).

Having narrated and recaptured into his system his struggles with Shaw and his brushes with the modernists, Chesterton is finally free to narrate himself as the true sage, whose life, thought, and world are completely integrated. The autobiography’s structure corresponds with this thesis. Chesterton spends most of the book making jokes and fighting philosophical foes. Before enjoying the heavenly banquet of Chapter XIV, he faces nihilism (Chapter IV), confronts the Chesterbelloc (Chapter V), defends journalism against high literature (Chapter VIII), and deals at length with Shaw (Chapter X) and James (Chapter XIII). The Belloc banquet is a vision of Chesterton’s construction of his authority against his literary enemies fully realized, and serves to prepare the way for a discussion of his sage system. Although chronologically Chesterton converted to Catholicism years before the final debate with Shaw or the Belloc banquet, he feels free to discuss his fully formulated Catholic philosophy and narrate his conversion to Catholicism only in his autobiography’s sixteenth and final chapter, “The God with the Golden Key.” The chapter title refers both to Chesterton’s metaphor of faith as a key that unlocks the world and to Chesterton’s conviction that Catholicism is the real-world
fulfillment of the truths of popular legends, like that which he saw in the toy theatre production of his youth.

IV: Autobiography as Mystery: Father Brown and the Case of G. K. Chesterton

As we enter the work’s final chapter, there is, however, one serious problem with Chesterton’s autobiographical construction of his authority that we have not discussed. Although Chesterton has succeeded at narrating and thereby containing the two largest threats to his authority, he is himself penned in by the strategies by which he contains the threat of modernism. As I have shown, Chesterton contains the threat of modernism by trivializing the movement through his use of humor; his comic narratives of James play upon the tropes of popular humor to underscore modernism’s lack of appeal and general irrelevance for most people. This very Chestertonian appeal to the good sense of the masses creates a serious problem for his own authority, though. As I have also discussed, Chesterton in his autobiography is acutely aware that the masses and the populace as a whole are growing progressively less fond of his work. He estimates that his popularity had peaked by 1913, speculates about whether journalism is still a truly popular medium in 1936, and even wonders aloud whether his autobiography will be read when it is published. If “the gallery are the gods,” as “An Apology for Buffoons” and Chesterton’s autobiography aggressively assert against the modernists, then Chesterton’s diminishing popularity implies the falsity of his own message; the sword with which he slays modernism potentially slays him as well.

The autobiography’s appeal to humor poses another problem for Chesterton. The “Apology for Buffoons” offers Chesterton’s most systematic defense of his late
nonfiction style and, as we have seen, Chesterton echoes this essay’s model of authorship and employs its rhetoric in his autobiography. It is unclear, however, how this model of authorship could be employed to enunciate a totalistic system; it is hard to see how a buffoon could be a prophet. In the “Apology,” Chesterton defends his comedy as a means of preaching his dogma, but if, as the essay asserts, the joke is the only remaining literary device that permits a person to speak to the whole of society, it follows that any explicit, systematic attempt to teach the whole of society is now impossible. It is possible to intersperse Aquinas with jokes, as Chesterton does; it is not possible to relate the entire *Summa Theologica* as a series of punch lines. The social unity “Apology for Buffoons” and the autobiography aim to preserve is ultimately, though unintentionally, a unity without explicit and positive dogmatic content.

Chesterton can succeed against the modernists simply by joking, as jokes generally depend upon the audience’s preexistent tastes and convictions, and the modernist aesthetic violates the community’s traditional aesthetic sense. However, while Chesterton considers his version of Catholicism to be logically implied by English—indeed, all—traditional cultural values, Catholicism is by no means valued by the English cultural tradition. In Chesterton’s last essays, he considers England to be a near-“Pagan” country seemingly intractably opposed to Catholicism (“Century” 473-74). Consequently, a buffoon cannot preach Catholicism in England, save perhaps to the choir of English Catholics. Chesterton’s autobiographical victory over the modernists seems Pyrrhic, as he enters the autobiography’s final chapter apparently deauthorized by lack of popularity and unable to preach—as a prophet must—to the unconverted. In Chesterton’s *Aquinas*, the saint exhausts himself in intellectual battle with a rapidly
spreading nihilism, and returns to the monastery with such a “horror of that outer world, in which there blew such winds of doctrines” that he neither writes for the public nor voluntarily leaves the monastery again (141). Chesterton’s final volume of essays on religious matters, issued in 1935, was published by the Catholic publisher Sheed and Ward; the “Introductory Note” informs us that Chesterton nearly named the volume “Joking Apart” and warns us that we “must not look for many jokes” here (339). Chesterton also comments that “An Apology for Buffoons” now reads to him as a sort of “swan-song” to his work in that genre (“Introductory Note” 340). On second reading, even the Belloc banquet, in which the autobiography’s dominant vision of authorship is consummated, seems to confirm that the buffoon enthroned still cannot preach: each of the after-dinner speeches consists entirely of jokes, and none really mean anything. In this context, Chesterton’s claim to be a sage who interprets the world through human nature breaks down. He is simply a literary figure past his prime, a minor writer beloved by the Catholic subculture but famous primarily for his work in devalued genres like the comic essay and detective fiction. If Chesterton has contained the threat of Shaw and the threat of the modernists, he has also contained the threat of himself.

Uncoincidentally although somewhat strangely, Chesterton opens the philosophically central final chapter of his autobiography, “The God with the Golden Key,” by discussing his detective fiction. As this passage also serves as Chesterton’s final autobiographical discussion of his identity as an author, it is of considerable importance. In it, Chesterton surprisingly accepts his diminished literary reputation and concedes that he is not fit for serious writing. He claims to have “never taken [his] novels or short stories seriously,” and to have “never . . . imagined that I had any
particular status in anything so serious as a novel” (Chesterton *Autobiography* 313). The only reputation he claims for himself here is that of a prominent writer of detective fiction; his “name” continues to have “a certain notoriety as that of a writer of . . . detective stories” (Chesterton *Autobiography* 312). In this unassuming passage, Chesterton has done what both Carlyle and Wells found unthinkable. As they face the dilemma that reader-response poses for their all-encompassing interpretive systems, Carlyle attempts to eliminate the audience and Wells dreams of a perfect future audience; Chesterton, by contrast, accepts the apparent judgment of his audience. Although his reputation as a critic, novelist, and poet is diminishing, he is still loved as a mystery writer, and it is on that rather unprestigious basis of authority that he opens his final and most ideologically important chapter. Freud observes that the primary way one recovers from trauma is by accepting the diminishment of one’s ego, and Chesterton’s autobiography, the happiest autobiography in this study, alone accepts the audience’s mixed verdict on the author. Chesterton seems to have allowed himself to be interpreted by the audience, and to have thereby surrendered his sage authority to interpret the world.

But Chesterton does not surrender his sage authority quite so easily. There is a repeated pattern in Chesterton’s flamboyantly paradoxical take on the sage discourse: he grants an apparently damaging judgment, then recontextualizes it so as to incorporate it into his own philosophical system. Apparently Chesterton is not an all-interpreting sage; he is just a detective story writer. A detective story writer naturally has the authority to write and interpret detective stories, however. And, as many later critics and Chesterton himself have observed, the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century detective story is a fundamentally hermeneutical genre, in which the detective interprets and gives meaning
to an otherwise apparently meaningless reality. If Chesterton ultimately cannot be a sage, Father Brown can.

As George Landow has discussed, prophecy includes both interpretation of the world as it exists and prediction, from the meaning of the world as it exists, of the realities of the world as it will be. If Wells’s science fiction and science-fiction inflected non-fiction rely almost entirely on the latter meaning of prophecy, Chesterton’s mystery writing and sage work rely almost entirely on the former element of the definition. In addition to being a major author of detective fiction, Chesterton was also a foundational critic of the detective story, and his critical essays on the subject foreshadow much of what detective fiction’s prominent modern critics identify as the genre’s rhetorical and epistemological functions. Chesterton can transform the sage into a detective and the prophecy into a mystery because detective fiction as a genre does much of the same hermeneutic work as the sage discourse. If we recall the standard Holloway/Landow definition of the sage as one who interprets the seemingly uninterpretable and thereby restores a totalistic, unified meaning to a metaphysically ruptured world, and recall also my analysis throughout this dissertation of the total dominance the sage requires over his audience, we will find many parallels in the characters and readers of detective fiction.

A summary of some important recent studies of detective fiction and of Chesterton’s observations about the genre will serve to illustrate my point. As John Thompson notes, the fundamental nature of the detective story is “hermeneutic; it explores what it means to be caught up in the mazes of modernity” (9). Chesterton concurs: the detective story gives meaning to the apparently meaningless modern, urban world (“A Defense” 158-61). Ronald Thomas asserts that the detective “explain[s] an
event that seems inexplicable to everyone else” by interpreting an apparently illegible
sign, and in the process restores and defines individual and national identity (Thomas 2-3). Joseph Kestner and George Dove both observe that over the course of the story, a
detective shapes a random chaos of events into an “ordered universe”; thus, the genre
reflects an intense “yearning for order” projected out to “the fantasy level” (Kestner 21, 20; Dove 35-36). Chesterton also associates the genre with a restoration of meaning to
the universe. As I have discussed, Chesterton always seeks to restore meaning to the
world by interpreting human nature. He writes that the detective story serves as a means
of fathoming and coming to understand “human nature” and that in this the genre is akin
to the ultimate unveiling of all things, the apocalypse or “Day of Judgment” (“The Ideal
Detective Story” 401-3). Kestner theorizes that the reader’s assistance is needed in
detective fiction’s restoration of meaning; it is necessary that “the detective . . .
donimates the reader as well as the recorder/companion/narrator” (20-21). Chesterton
similarly posits that “The detective story differs from every other story in this: that the
reader is only happy if he feels a fool” (“The Ideal” 400). Eliot can accuse Chesterton of
condescending to his readers, but the charges are simply inapplicable to Father Brown.

The high level of epistemological and metaphysical freight Chesterton considers
the detective story to carry is perhaps best expressed in his repeated judgment that the
most famous fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, is “the one great popular legend in the
modern world” (“Detective Novels” 2). Legends are a prime, perhaps the prime source
of information about human nature and the world for Chesterton, and, presumably
because the Sherlock Holmes stories give meaning to the new urban landscape, he
considers this body of detective stories to comprise the only new legend of the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the only true legend that originates after the age of Dickens. However, Chesterton runs into an obvious problem here: if, of all detectives, only Holmes possesses the extra-textual popularity Chesterton requires of a legend, Holmes is for Chesterton a rather poor legend. Chesterton insists that all legends teach some important truth, and the legend of Holmes does teach the Chestertonian truth that the modern urban landscape still possesses a discoverable meaning and the people living in it still possess human value and interest (cf. “A Defense” 158-61). Chestertonian philosophy and paradox can find some religious truth in the outline of this secular legend. But in large part, the Holmes stories teach what Chesterton considers a false epistemology and false metaphysics. As many critics have noted, Doyle and his imitators ascribe to an objectivist, scientific mode of interpretation that places ultimate interpretive authority in the hands of a professional class (Thomas 3, Kestner 16, etc.). In Holmesian detective fiction, intuition and tradition are incapable of discovering the truth; truth reveals itself when the proper technology, such as the lie detector or the magnifying glass, is applied to the material body or the material world (Thomas 17-25). The world seems meaningless until the detective uses scientific tools to impose and extract order and meaning on and from it, and presumably anyone using the same tools properly would reach the same result (Thomas 3, 5). If Eliot endeavored to make the Victorian sage seem simply a failed literary critic, in the context of Doyle’s stories the all-interpreting sage seems a failed scientific detective.

Chesterton’s Father Brown stories constitute an attempt to create a legend to contest or supplant that of Sherlock Holmes. Father Brown restores meaning to an urban English landscape without recourse to the scientific and materialistic methods of Holmes.
Like Chesterton, Father Brown discovers hidden truth and restores meaning to the world almost exclusively through his profound knowledge of human nature; like Chesterton’s sage writings, these stories give the world not a scientific but a “metaphysical” meaning and order (Hock 3). As Samuel Hynes observes, “Holmes was the apotheosis of late-Victorian materialism: a brilliant, confident, scientific know-it-all” who provides “rational solutions” to seemingly insoluble problems; Father Brown, by contrast, is the “anti-Holmes,” “unscientific, unbrilliant and unnoticeable,” reliant “not . . . on ratiocination, but simply on seeing people as they really are” (qtd. in Kestner 229). The Holmesian method is most famously refuted in the Father Brown story “The Absence of Mr. Glass,” in which “Dr. Orion Hood, the eminent criminologist” uses Holmesian deduction to prove that a man has committed murder in revenge for blackmail, when in fact no crime has been committed at all (Chesterton “Absence” 171, Porter 74). The technologies of detection are refuted in “The Mistake of the Machine,” in which Father Brown reveals the conclusions of a lie detector and its analyst to be “valueless,” and thereby saves a man from false imprisonment (Chesterton “Mistake,” esp. 221, 231).

Father Brown’s method is best explained, and its similarities to Chesterton’s method as a sage best seen in “The Secret of Father Brown.” An American insists on knowing how Father Brown’s “method” of detection differs from those of “Dupin . . . Lecocq, Sherlock Holmes, and Nicholas Carter” and eventually pesters an answer out of him (Chesterton “Secret” 463). Father Brown considers the idea that “detection is a science” mistaken, for the science of detection is “dehumaniz[ing]”; it means “getting outside a man and studying him as if he were a giant insect” and is often used to oppress the poor (Chesterton “Secret” 465). The primary flaw of the science of detection is that
“far from being knowledge, it’s actually the suppression of what we know”—that we have a human nature in common with criminals and are capable of their acts (Chesterton “Secret” 465). Father Brown, by contrast, discovers criminals through a “religious exercise” of identifying with them through their common human nature, until he has imaginatively committed the act himself, and can see who must have done the deed and why (Chesterton “Secret” 465-66).

Father Brown, like Chesterton, refutes both the world’s apparent meaninglessness and the professional experts’ claim to alone understand reality through his mastery of human nature. Using his knowledge of human nature, Father Brown captures criminals who often are experimental artists, scientists, atheists, or even scientific detectives (cf. Porter 73, 78). Father Brown, as the narratives explicitly indicate, discredits the authority of the “capitalist expert” and restores the authority of the priest, of the Catholic Church, to interpret the world (Chesterton “Ghost” 447, cf. Perkin 87). Father Brown will not acknowledge the supremacy of the secular state even by turning criminals into the police; he simply hears the culprits’ confessions and lets them go (cf. Kestner 229). In these, “the first metaphysical detective stories,” Chesterton’s interpretive system reigns triumphant, without the obstacles it faces in his nonfiction, rival sages who are never entirely defeated and an increasingly fragmented and at times resistant readership (Hock 3). Since Father Brown so successfully interprets not only the clues to the crime at hand, but also the nature of the world in which he finds himself, the Father Brown stories come to resemble allegory as much as detection, and “Father Brown emerges, not only as sleuth but as teacher” (Porter 84, Kestner 255). Father Brown is the sage Chesterton can no longer be, and he quickly became a popular legend.
From his inception, Father Brown was considered by much of the public and many critics to be Holmes’s only true rival and he remains “the second-most famous mystery solver in English literature” (Kestner 256, Gardiner 1). Possessing the extratextual life Chesterton demanded of the true legend, Father Brown has been featured as a character in novels by other authors, translated into television and cinema (Chesterton lived long enough to see the first Father Brown movie), and has influenced scores of later clerical detectives (cf. Hock, Masie Ward 549). Chesterton himself suggested Father Brown’s extratextual destiny, writing, “I cast my mystery on the waters, so to speak, hoping it might return to me after many days, with a totally different title and a much better tale” (“Errors” 78). In the minds of such prominent critics as Harold Bloom and Jorge Borges, Chesterton is still “the best of the classic mystery writers” (Kestner 256, Gardiner 1, Harold Bloom xi). The enshrinement of Father Brown in the canon of detective fiction began long before Chesterton died. By The Incredulity of Father Brown in 1926, it was not uncommon for reviewers to claim that Father Brown “threatens the supremacy of Mr. Sherlock Holmes” (Rev. of Incredulity 425). As Chesterton was writing his autobiography in 1935-1936, reviewers were calling Father Brown “one of our institutional literary detectives” and Chesterton’s prestige as a mystery writer was such that he was chosen to introduce A Century of Detective Stories, a definitive anthology of the genre (Holtby 515). Chesterton used this opportunity to reaffirm the capacity of a detective story to be “the only real legend of our time.”

Chesterton’s transfer of sagehood to Father Brown accounts for some important, and otherwise apparently inexplicable, elements of his autobiography’s structure and content. Early on, Chesterton explains the autobiography’s structure in terms of “a
detective story.” He explains that “in the first few pages of a police novel, there are often three or four hints rather to rouse curiosity than allay it,” shocking images that are “exhibited in the beginning though not explained until the end” (Chesterton Autobiography 56). Chesterton then relates these clues to his readers, imparting several striking but rather obscure observations and images concerning his childhood; the most important of these for my purposes is that factual, real world events seem “far less real” to him than the stylized puppet shows on traditional themes he enjoyed in youth (Chesterton Autobiography 56-57). Lest we overlook these clues, he half-jokingly informs us that “The patient reader may yet discover that these dark hints have something to do with the ensuing mystery of my misguided existence, and even with the crime [apparently his conversion] that comes before the end” (Chesterton Autobiography 56). These observations come near the end of the chapter entitled “The Man with the Golden Key.” Significantly, when, in the final chapter, “The God with the Golden Key,” it comes time to explain the meaning of the mysteries of Chesterton and of the universe, Father Brown enters the narrative to propose the solution and solve the crime. Since Father Brown possesses an interpretive dominance that Chesterton himself cannot attain, when the autobiography attempts to discuss the particulars of Chesterton’s sage system, Father Brown displaces Chesterton as the narrative’s dominant character.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this discursus on detective fiction, Chesterton opens the final chapter of his autobiography by identifying himself primarily as an author of detective fiction, and mentioning that he suspects that many people “know that a large number of my crime stories were concerned with a person called Father Brown” (Autobiography 313). He observes that “it has generally been said that Father Brown had
an original in real life,” and informs us that while this does not hold for the details of Father Brown’s appearance, Father Brown did have an “intellectual inspiration” in “Father John O’Connor,” who was also the “intellectual inspiration . . . of much more important things”—Chesterton’s Catholic convictions (Chesterton Autobiography 313-14). In this passage, Chesterton is no longer the author of Father Brown; rather, Father Brown authors Chesterton’s belief system. Consequently, if Chesterton wishes to explain his convictions, he “cannot do better than tell the story of how the first notion of this detective comedy came into [his] mind,” and narrate his early meetings with Father O’Connor (Autobiography 314).

While the autobiography will still proceed to discuss Chesterton’s sage system and ultimate convictions, its final narrative events are Chesterton’s early meetings with Father O’Connor, which occur between 1903 and 1907 (cf. Pearce 90-91, Chesterton Autobiography 316). Consequently, the autobiography’s narrative element comes to an end not in 1936, but in Chesterton’s mid-Edwardian hey-day, when his popularity was nearing its height and neither the Chesterbelloc attack nor modernism had yet arisen to trouble his authority. Chesterton meets Father O’Connor while lecturing in Yorkshire, and immediately considers him a jovial friend (Autobiography 316). The encounter that inspired Chesterton to “pu[t] him, or rather part of him, into a string of sensational stories” and that has “a vital connection” with the fact of Chesterton’s conversion occurs somewhat later, however (Autobiography 316-17). In this later encounter, Chesterton runs into Father O’Connor at the house of mutual friends, and then goes out for a stroll with him. In the course of this walk, Chesterton expresses to Father O’Connor his position on a social issue connected with “vice and crime” (Autobiography 317). In
keeping with how interpretive authority in the autobiography has passed from Chesterton to Father Brown, Father O’Connor finds Chesterton flatly “in error, or rather in ignorance” “on this particular point,” and Chesterton can only confess “indeed I was” (317). Father O’Connor knows the truth because his experience hearing confessions has caused him to be acquainted with deeper moral and intellectual “abysses” than Chesterton could “imagin[e]” (Autobiography 317). Father O’Connor’s faith is based on looking deeper into the pit of modern nihilism and immorality than even Chesterton has, and consequently Father O’Connor has a deeper authority. The two men then return to their hosts’ house, where they meet two “Cambridge undergraduates” and talk art, music, and literature with them (Chesterton Autobiography 317). The undergraduates like the priest, but dismiss him after his departure, within Chesterton’s hearing. When the undergraduates proclaim that Father O’Connor is “innocent and ignorant . . . [and] afraid of knowledge” of the world’s evils, Chesterton, knowing what he knows, “nearly burst[s] into a loud harsh laugh” (Autobiography 318).

Chesterton takes two things away from the event, both crucial in his life-narrative. First, the experience inspires in Chesterton the idea of “constructing a comedy in which a priest should appear to know nothing and in fact know more about crime than all the criminals”; it leads him to “disguis[e] Father O’Connor as Father Brown” (Autobiography 318). The incident also strikes Chesterton in a more personal and “much more serious” way (Autobiography 319). It makes him suspect that his central personal and intellectual difficulties—the “morbid but vivid problems of the soul” that dominated his art school days, and in response to which he has formulated much of his philosophy—can be truly resolved only by the Catholic Church (Chesterton Autobiography 319). He
finds this conclusion “incredible” at first, for though he found it “easy to believe” “that the Catholic Church knew more about good than” he did, he has never suspected that “she knew more about evil than [he] did” (Chesterton *Autobiography* 319). In this symbolic philosophical victory over Chesterton himself, the Catholic Church in the person of Father O’Connor displays that it grasps the whole of the myriad complexities that comprise human nature and thus possesses the right to interpret the world. As a result, “fully fifteen years” after their first meeting, Chesterton finds himself “making to him [Father O’Connor] my [Chesterton’s] General Confession and being received into the Church that he served” (*Autobiography* 316).

Now that Father Brown has converted Chesterton and has taken control of the narrative, the autobiography can proceed to detail Chesterton’s sage system, his idiosyncratic interpretation of Roman Catholicism. As a Watson to Father O’Connor’s Holmes, the converted Chesterton writes with a level of interpretive authority that he has previously lacked; he writes with the command of the narrator of a conventional mystery. When Chesterton finishes his narrative of Father O’Connor, merely twelve pages remain in the book. However, these twelve pages contain Chesterton’s central acts of interpretive authority over those who have interpreted him—the authoritative diagnosis of the errors of Shaw that I discussed earlier and an explanation of the philosophical origins of the literary errors of the “newest poets” (*Autobiography* 326-27). These pages also contain the book’s only explicit assertions of some of the central claims of Chesterton’s autobiography and philosophy—chiefly, that only the Catholic church’s doctrines can shape Chesterton’s life into a coherent whole, and that fideistic, Catholic belief is the only way to be sure of the existence and nature of the material universe (*Autobiography* 326-27).
320, 330). Moreover, these pages comprise the book’s only attempt at a systematic explanation of Catholic thought. These dozen pages interpret other thinkers, the world, and Chesterton himself—in other words, prophesy—with an authority that the rest of the narrative struggles towards but lacks. Completing one of the autobiography’s major tropes, its anti-individualism, Chesterton is never more of a sage than when acting as Father Brown’s amanuensis. In the book’s final paragraph, Chesterton reminds us of the source of his late-arriving interpretive mastery. Near the end of the autobiography, everything that has previously seemed unclear is suddenly clarified and everything that has previously seemed unmeaning suddenly signifies, because “this story . . . can only end as any detective story should end, with its particular questions answered and its own primary problem solved” (Chesterton Autobiography 330). The current volume, we find, is a mystery novel and, as is true of many other successful mysteries, Chesterton has written it and Father Brown has solved it.

The ending of Chesterton’s autobiography, like the ending of Wells’s second autobiography, speaks to the collapse of the sage discourse as the Second World War approaches. Against the culturally overwhelming assaults of nihilism and professionalism, Wells and Chesterton employ fascinating rhetorical pyrotechnics to keep alive both the sage discourse’s basic premise, the sense of an overarching meaning for the universe, and the discourse itself. However, as they attempt to use their autobiographies to gain interpretive mastery of their less successful controversies, Wells and Chesterton come to sense that their task is impossible; in the current cultural situation, the sage discourse can survive only as a fiction. Wells realizes that if the sage discourse is going to give a single, unitary meaning to the universe, it must be read by an infinitely pliant
and infinitely affirmative audience, an audience that is, at least for the foreseeable future, simply unattainable. His second autobiography ends with something close to science fiction, as he waits in hope for the future Lover-Shadow who will give his theories the unconditional acceptance they require and thereby restore meaning to the world.

Chesterton’s realizations are more concerned with author than audience. He realizes that if the sage discourse is going to give a single, unitary meaning to the universe, it must be written by an interpreter who invariably and obviously defeats his rivals and is never wrong, an interpreter who—barring supernatural intervention—can exist only in fiction. Chesterton’s autobiography ends with something akin to detective fiction, as he invokes Father Brown to solve the “insoluble problem” of the meaning of both himself and the world (“Insoluble Problem” 704). The endings of Chesterton and Wells’s autobiographical projects make a sort of coda to the sage discourse in its classical form, as they self-consciously diagnose the nature of the genre’s collapse, and foreshadow its bizarre progeny in the world of genre fiction.

But Chesterton was a pugnacious controversialist, and even in these straits, he does not give up his battle to preserve the legitimacy of his thought quite this easily. I have parsed only one element of his autobiography’s conclusion. The volume’s ending paragraph is worth quoting in full and analyzing in some detail:

This story, therefore, can only end as any detective story should end, with its own particular questions answered and its primary problem solved. Thousands of totally different stories, with totally different problems have ended in the same place with their problems solved. But for me my end is my beginning, as Maurice Baring quoted of Mary Stuart, and this overwhelming conviction that there is one key which can unlock all doors brings back to me the first glimpse of the glorious gift of the senses; and the sensational experience of sensation. And there starts up again before me, standing sharp and clear in shape as of old, the figure of a man who crosses a bridge and carries a key; as I saw him when I first looked into
fairyland through the window of my father’s peep-show. But I know that he who is called the Pontifex, the Builder of the Bridge, is called the Claviger, or bearer of the Key; and that such keys were given to bind and loose when he was a poor fisher in a far province, beside a small and almost secret sea (330-31).

The basic idea of this paragraph is clear enough. Now that that Chesterton possesses full interpretive authority, all the threads of the work are connected. His selfhood is unified and his universe whole. Employing a common Chestertonian metaphor for faith, he declares that he now has the key that unlocks the world and forces a seemingly arbitrary and incomprehensible existence to yield its meaning. Having solved the mystery of the world’s meaning, he returns to his first clue concerning this mystery, his first memory. His first memory concerns the first legend through with he came to know human nature and to sense the meaning of life, the fairy tale of a man on a bridge with a key. The figure of this fairy tale, Chesterton concludes, is dramatically fulfilled and embodied in the Catholic Pontiff, etymologically “the builder of the bridge” and by tradition “the Keeper of the Keys.” The Chestertonian premise that the traditions embodied in legends contain information about human nature that enables us to know ourselves and reality is thus consummately fulfilled in the traditions and dogmas of the Catholic Church. This paragraph would provide the perfect ending for the autobiography of a sage—Chesterton’s self, universe, and philosophical system now form a continuous whole—were its triumph not made hollow by its reliance on the invocation of a fictional detective and the tropes of genre fiction.

Fortunately for Chesterton, my deconstruction and demythologization of the ending of his autobiography work only if Father Brown is a fictional character, akin to the protagonist of a novel. This assumption is true only in part. The concluding sentence
of my previous paragraph is somewhat logically flawed, as it ignores Chesterton’s
division of the genus “fiction” into two metaphysically different species—the novel, a
pretentious, distinctly modern book, fundamentally devoid of meaning, that is written by
a specialist and read by an elite audience; and the popular legend, an epic narrative,
deeply instructive concerning human nature, that is written by a popular author and
beloved by a mass audience. As Chesterton has reminded us earlier in the narrative, his
autobiography is “not a . . . modern story” and neither is the story of Father Brown
(Autobiography 54). Father Brown is a legend. As I have shown, Father Brown was by
the 1930s commonly enough considered Holmes’s equal that the legendary status
Chesterton ascribes to Holmes logically extends to his own creation. As I have shown,
Chesterton wrote the Father Brown stories to provide a rival for the legend of Sherlock
Holmes and to provide an alternative context in which the Holmes legend could be read,
with the hope of thereby rewriting some of the mythological foundations of a skeptical,
materialistic, professionalized society. The Father Brown stories provide us with an
alternate legendary narrative in which the Catholic priest, through his knowledge of
human nature and contempt for professional experts, is best equipped to determine the
truth.

In this context, it is deeply significant that at two crucial moments Chesterton’s
autobiography closely associates the detective story and the toy-theatre, where in his
youth he first saw legends enacted. Early on, the autobiography identifies the young
Chesterton’s exaggerated sense of the reality of toy theatre plays as a central clue to the
mystery that this volume comprises (56-58). As the volume ends, Chesterton fulfills the
promise he has given in this clue by making his final appeal to detective stories lead into
his final reference to his father’s fairy-play, and thus to his Catholic beliefs. In the conclusion of Chesterton’s autobiography, the detective story blurs into the fairy play; both assume the function of legends and lead to ultimate truth. Chesterton’s autobiography primarily credits his Catholic beliefs not to sages like Cardinal Newman, but to the legends he learned as a child growing up in a religiously skeptical Unitarian household in the materialistic climate of late Victorian England. Secondarily, Chesterton’s autobiography attributes his beliefs to Father Brown. By using this last mention of the detective story to set up the assertion that the legends of Chesterton’s youth led him to Catholicism—and, conversely, by casting the legends of Chesterton’s youth as clues in a mystery whose solution is the Catholic Church—Chesterton’s autobiography implicitly equates the fairy tale and the detective story in both their legendary nature and their sanctifying function. The final, implicit hope of Chesterton’s autobiography is, then, that in the skeptical ages to come the legend of Father Brown may affect future children in the same manner that the legend of the fairy play affected the late Victorian Chesterton. Chesterton’s beliefs would not, then, perish but remain and teach later generations the truth about the world and human nature. The sage discourse will not, then, live on as merely a fiction, but as a legend, and, for Chesterton, legends are true.

1 The nickname also recalls Disraeli, but Chesterton’s contemporaries reference this connection only to make jokes about his anti-Semitism, not to make any serious point.
2 For the sake of clarity, I will primarily substantiate my claims about Chesterton’s youthful skepticism from his mature works or from his Autobiography. The principal surviving literary works from Chesterton’s college years are primarily fairy tales or romances, and so lack the intellectual precision of his mature essays or philosophical novels. I also use this method of proof because I am more concerned with the elements of skepticism in Chesterton’s mature work than with the question of how much of this skepticism stems from his art school experience. However, Chesterton’s stories from the 1890s do image
each of the skeptical ideas I will discuss. “Apotheosis” is a first person narrative from the perspective of a
madman who really does not believe in the independent existence of either the material world or other
people, believing instead that he is the God who created the world (630-31). “The Traveller’s Tale”
imagines a man living in a mad world, lost “in the land of unreason,” wandering through the “twist[s] and
doubles” of the “madman’s path” (“Traveller’s Tale 606). “The Moderate Country” mocks rationalism,
evervisioning a ridiculous and horrific country “where everything [i]s in order”—trees are all planted an
equal distance apart, poets are shot, exaggerators are beheaded, and no one is allowed to speak without
stating the “syllogism” he uses to reach his conclusion (656-58). “A Fragment” mocks empiricism in the
person of a comical Admiral, who refuses to believe that America exists because he will not believe
anything “superstitiously or on authority but wish[e[s] to verify everything for himself” and he has not been
there (617-18). “The Man With Two Legs” features a protagonist, Eric Petersen, who, having discarded
the idea of a unitary and continuous self, perpetually invents new selves. He claims that “there had been
six Eric Petersens before the current one,” and he writes an epitaph for each (“Man With Two” 773). Thus,
while I have preferred later statements as more systematic and explicit, Chesterton’s art school writings do
outline and verify the extent of his collegiate skepticism.
3 The debt to Carlyle’s Clothes Philosophy here should be obvious.
4 Cf. Lauer’s observation that for Chesterton “reason functioning purely naturally . . . cannot come to
terms with the totality of reality” (19); see also, for instance, Orthodoxy 27-28.
5 Chesterton’s disdain for facts continually shocked his contemporaries.
6 Cf. Hardie’s summation of Chesterton’s thought on this matter: “The world as we know it does not
explain itself” (474).
7 Quite likely, Chesterton also derives this critique from the original anti-materialist, Plato, whose defenses
of the need for abstract thought and attacks on the sufficiency of empirical observation he was fond of
referring. As George Levine notes, some late nineteenth-century scientists had also suggested the
subjectivity of science; Karl Pearson’s critique of perception, like Chesterton’s, led him to conclude that
“There are no ‘laws of nature,’ only ideas of regularity imposed by consciousness on nature” (qtd. in
Levine 257).
8 See also Chesterton’s graphic description in Orthodoxy of the sanity-destroying solipsism that threatens
the subjectivist.
9 The strictly willed nature of the rejection of nihilism comes out especially in Chesterton’s discussion of
Robert Louis Stevenson. He praises Stevenson’s “scepticism about [late nineteenth-century] scepticism”
(Robert 75). Though Stevenson had no alternative philosophy to offer, he could at least rename “the flag of
the skull and crossbones” under which all artists at the time “were travelling” “the Jolly Roger” (Robert
79).
10 The similarity to Kierkegaard, with whom Chesterton was unfamiliar, is not coincidental; Tertullian was
also an important influence on Kierkegaard.
11 I am aware that at times Chesterton denied this appellation. The only credal system he found ultimately
convincing, Roman Catholicism, had condemned certain forms of fideism, and Chesterton did not care to
be associated with the term. A person who asserts, as Chesterton repeatedly does, that we can know the
validity of reason and the senses only through faith must, however, be classed as a fideist if the term is to
have any meaning.
12 I am aware that Chesterton’s lock and key image is not so simply fideistic as Kierkegaard’s leap in the
dark. Chesterton’s image implies, for instance, that there are keys that do not fit, that religious truth, while
not objectively accessible, is objectively definable. The essential point here, however, is merely that while
for Chesterton the world has meaning, this meaning is neither logical nor discoverable through objective,
rational inquiry.
13 This element of Chesterton’s thought also helps to explain or, at the very least, serves to justify his
medievalism. Chesterton defended medieval thought against modern because he considered the former to
be derived from the manifold sources of human understanding (or, “common sense”) and the latter to be
derived from the reductive method and eccentric perceptions of an individual (Aquinas 144, cf. Chaucer
339).
14 Cf., among many writers to this effect, Coates Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis 54. See
also, for instance, Chesterton’s own comment in “An Apology for Buffoons”: “Some of the simplest things
of human history are now quite invisible to minds that have grown accustomed to subdivision or specialization” (353).

15 While Chesterton does not use the word paradox in the sentence from which I have quoted, the phrase is offered as an explanation of “Paradoxes of Christianity,” the subject of the chapter in which it appears. Chesterton’s definition here fundamentally accords with Hugh Kenner’s suggestion that paradox is language breaking under the attempt to express “the complexity of being” (12,16).

16 Cf. Chesterton’s novel *Manalive*, which declares that when men “are gay and vigorous they invariably make rules. We are never free until some institution frees us; and liberty cannot exist until it is declared by authority” (20).

17 On the Church’s affirmation of the existence of material reality, see Chesterton’s assertion in his autobiography that the Catholic Church addresses his “most appalling depths of fundamental scepticism and solipsism” by “affirm[ing] the actuality of external things; so that even moderns might hear her voice; and by a revolution in their very brain begin to believe their eyes” (330).

18 Chesterton, it should be admitted, is famously harsh against other faiths in the matters concerning which they would differ from Catholicism. The summary I have given of his thought on this subject is fundamentally just, however. For example, Islam is one of the religions he most often attacks, and he praises Islam as a religion of “common sense” and depicts the prophet Mohammed as being, like himself, a prophet who “discovers the obvious things,” the common truths lost in a decadent culture (*New Jerusalem* 26, 28). He faults Islam especially for deny free will (which he considered undemocratic), and for being unable to appreciate and learn from the truths present in other cultures and religions (*New Jerusalem* 32-33). A similar distrust of all forms of cultural and religious isolation seems to be in part responsible for his regrettable anti-Semitism (cf., for instance, “To Shaw” 518).

19 Because Chesterton accepted Newman’s notion that infallibility and tradition primarily reside in the sensus fidei, the sense of the faithful, he saw no contradiction between his democratic beliefs and the hierarchical Catholic Church.

20 I am aware that Chesterton was an Anglican when he wrote this sentence. Chesterton was then an Anglo-Catholic who insisted that the Anglican church held each of the doctrines I have listed. He posited at the time that these doctrines were part of the Catholic Faith held in common by both the Anglican and Roman churches. His switch to the Roman Catholic Church occurred, in large part, because he became convinced that the Anglican Church truly affirmed neither the sacramental ideal nor the idea of tradition. Consequently, the quotation can appropriately be applied to his Roman Catholic faith.

21 Wells is an obvious exception, which may explain the extreme anxiety Chesterton’s appeal to human nature caused him.

22 Interestingly, Wells complains of this tendency of Chesterton’s in his portrayal of Wimperdick, the eminent Catholic convert and apologist, in *The Bulplington of Blup*. “Wimperdick talked on, and as he talked, the Church as an undying witness [to the truth] became more solid and dominating and the particulars of the Faith it sustained more elusive (172).

23 For an overview and analysis of some of the more prominent Edwardian movements of this nature, see Hynes Chapters III-V (“Undecided Prophets,” “The Fabians: Mrs. Webb and Mr. Wells,” and “Science, Seers, and Sex”).

24 On the fallacy of the appeal to the future see, for instance, Chesterton’s observation in a 1907 essay: “The future is a blank wall on which I can paint my own portrait as large as I like it. If I am narrow I can make the future narrow; if I am mean I can make the future mean . . . . In the future all my rivals are dead because they are unborn. I know I could not write ‘Paradise Lost,’ but I could easily write a ‘Utopia’ very favorable to the sort of poetry I can write” (qtd. in Wills 103). Like many other contemporaries, Chesterton also seems to have taken Wells less seriously as he aged because of his constant changes of opinion. In the autobiography, Chesterton writes, “To use the name which would probably annoy him [Wells] most, I think he is a permanent reactionary. Whenever I met him, he seemed to be coming from somewhere, rather than going anywhere” (212).

25 It is quite difficult to affirm with certainty what books Chesterton read, if he does not directly quote them in his own work. As a columnist, he often referred to books he knew only at second hand. However, we can establish that, at the very least, Chesterton was familiar with the general argument of West’s biography. Shaw wrote a long review of it for *The New Statesman*, entitled, “The Case Against Chesterton,” in which
he summarized many of West’s points and added some of his own (Shaw “Case” 501-15). Chesterton replied to Shaw’s review-essay in a letter in the next New Statesman. In this reply, Chesterton writes that “Mr. West is welcome to know [the truth about his views], though I cannot promise that he will understand” it, which seems to imply that he has in fact read West’s biography (“To the Editor” 518).

26 Shaw also attempted, in his own words, to influence “some future great biographer”’s depiction of Chesterton with his admittedly “libelous” caricature of Chesterton as “Immenso Champernoon” in the original version of Back to Methuselah (“Glimpse” 633). The caricature is amusing—Champernoon makes every object an analogy and every analogy refer back to the Catholic Church and the need for fixity in life; he also deflects any serious points against him by turning them into weight jokes and refuses to realistically pin down the details of his system as he talks down his opponents—but, as Shaw admitted, it largely just repeats the self-deprecating jokes that Chesterton himself had already made (Shaw “Glimpse” 633, 641-42, 678, etc.). Consequently, while Shaw’s concern with influencing the biographical record of Chesterton—and thus interpreting and in some way authoring Chesterton himself—must be kept in mind, in discussing Chesterton’s autobiography I am going to be much more concerned with Chesterbelloc than with Champernoon.

27 In his final essay on Shaw, Chesterton discusses their conflict in similar terms: “I have argued with him [Shaw] nearly all my life; and the campaign has always depended on the tactic of outflanking or encirclement, which means being broader than your enemy” (Chesterton “Second Thoughts” 585).

28 Interestingly, this is a defense that Belloc could not have made. Like many other early twentieth-century authors, Belloc praised an idealized agricultural peasantry, but condemned the industrial and suburban masses, the people on the bus, as they actually were (Coates Crisis 59-60). Often, his defenses of Catholicism were openly elitist. He does not always make a good symbol for humanity en masse.

29 In case any reader should desire a complete breakdown, the chapter titles and their referents are as follows:

I “Hearsay Evidence” (family stories, tradition)
II “The Man with the Golden Key” (referring, figuratively, to Chesterton’s father)
III “How to Be a Dunce” (referring to Chesterton’s school days)
IV “How to Be a Lunatic” (referring to Chesterton’s youthful nihilism)
V “Nationalism and Notting Hill” (referring to Chesterton’s anti-imperialism)
VI “The Fantastic Suburb” (referring to Bedford Park, where he met his wife)
VII “The Crime of Orthodoxy” (referring to Chesterton’s conversion to Christianity)
VIII “Figures in Fleet Street” (referring to his journalistic friends)
IX “The Case against Corruption” (referring to the role he, his brother, and Belloc played in the fight over the Marconi Scandal)
X “Friendship and Foolery” (referring, obviously, to his friends and their pranks)
XI “The Shadow of the Sword” (referring to World War I)
XII “Some Political Celebrities” (referring, obviously, to important politicians he has known)
XIII “Some Literary Celebrities” (referring, obviously, to important literary figures, friend or foe, he has known)
XIV “Portrait of a Friend” (referring to Belloc)
XV “The Incomplete Traveller” (referring to his travel writing)
XVI “The God with the Golden Key” (on God himself, and G. K.’s conversion to Catholicism)

30 Chesterton’s favorite example of the relation of fairy tales to human nature was “Jack and the Beanstalk.” In contrast to “Mr. Bernard Shaw,” who would have us worship a Giant as, perhaps, “the Superman” or “a great forward movement of the life-force,” the fairy tale tells us “that giants should be killed because they are gigantic” (Chesterton “Wells” 43, 41, Orthodoxy 50). In contrast to modern authors who suggest that any difference from the norm should be embraced as an improvement, “Jack was the champion of the enduring human standards” (Chesterton “Wells” 42).

31 In his study of Stevenson, written around the same time as the first part of his autobiography, Chesterton asserts that more than any other modern novels, Stevenson’s works embody the basic clarities, drama, and virtues of traditional storytelling, and that this “special style or spirit” is derived from Stevenson’s young love of “the toy theatre” (Chesterton Robert 144-45, 58, cf. Wills 22). Chesterton also carefully notes that
his favorite modern writer, Charles Dickens, was another a fan of the toy theatre, but does not go so far in making it an interpretive key to understanding his work (Charles 70).

32 Cf. Chesterton’s judgment that “Dickens stands first and foremost as a defiant monument of what happens when a great literary genius has a literary taste akin to that of his community” (Charles 99). Since Chesterton considered Dickens the most powerful author of the nineteenth century, this judgment likely describes his own project as well.

33 Strangely enough, the photographs of Belloc in middle-age do somewhat resemble the traditional depictions of John Bull, insofar as it is possible to resemble an archetypal cartoon character.

34 While West’s biography, written during the First World War, patriotically hopes that Chesterton’s recently released anti-German war propaganda evidences a new vitality in his thought, West does not definitely assert this conclusion, but merely hopes that it might be true. The hope also seems obviously strained.

35 Chesterton mentions this decline in popularity while discussing his “Saturday pulpit” in the Daily News (Autobiography 119). He observes that from this pulpit, “Whatever were the merits of the sermon, it is probable that I had a larger congregation than I have ever had before or since” (Autobiography 120, cf. Gross “A Man of Letters” 257). He was employed by the Daily News from 1903 to 1912 (Coates Crisis 67, Wills 147).

36 Cf. Purcell’s comment on “The New Cake of Soap.” “Ezra Pound’s poem where ‘Chesterton’ becomes a one-word code for entrenched middle-brow philistinism” should be seen “in the contemporary context of what Virginia Woolf says about Wells and Bennett” (215).

37 The few authors who discuss Chesterton’s relations with individual modernists (Kevin Morris, Russell Kirk, and Jay Corrin) have done useful, though incomplete bibliographical work on the subject. However, the articles are usually written by rather defensive Chestertonians eager to justify their author in the eyes of the modernists. Aside from Jay Corrin’s pinpointing of Chesterton and Pound’s difference on the nature of the masses, the articles tend to minimize, trivialize, or psychologize the differences between Chesterton and the major modernists rather than profitably analyzing the open literary conflict between them.

38 As Carey notes, Wells and Shaw hated the masses as a whole, but wrote for the mass market primarily in the hope of reaching a minority of intelligent, open-minded souls within the masses who might help form a new elite, the Open Conspiracy or the next stage in Creative Evolution (62-63, 126-38). Bennett happily wrote for both the high literature market and low literature market, while Chesterton refused such differentiation. Some, such as Margaret Carovan, have suggested that he was the Edwardian era’s one entirely consistent populist (cf. Purcell 212).

39 On Chesterton’s importance to early twentieth century literary criticism, see especially the work of Baldick, who identifies Chesterton as both one of the “outstanding stylists” of the Edwardian critical essay and as the last significant representative of a major critical school (Baldick 59, 50). For remarks on Chesterton’s importance to literary criticism by his contemporaries, see, for example, Julius West’s judgment that Chesterton is justly “enthroned” among “critics,” Bullett’s praise of Chesterton’s “brilliant” criticism, and even Eliot’s own conclusion that Chesterton is the most “brilliant” critic of Dickens who has ever lived (West 84, Bullett 23, 194, Eliot “G. K. Chesterton,” “Wilkie Collins and Dickens” 410). These lofty appraisals are particularly noteworthy as they come from authors whose judgments on Chesterton’s work as a whole were negative or at best mixed. Chesterton’s contributions to criticism were formally acknowledged when he was offered a probable chair in English literature by the University of Birmingham despite his lack of a college degree (Gross Rise 189). Saying that his true calling was journalism, Chesterton declined the position, however.

40 Soap advertisements were plentiful at this time and, because there really did not seem to be any great difference between types of soap, these advertisements often became a symbol of the manipulative character of advertising. Pound explicitly makes the connection between soap advertisements and popular literature when he advises other poets and critics to “Consider the way of the scientists rather than the way of an advertising agent for a new soap” (“A Retrospect” 6). Pound considered the poem’s short length crucial to its success as an attack on Chesterton, asserting that “Chesterton is like a vile scum upon the pond. The multitude of his mumblings cannot be killed by multitude but only by a sharp thrust” (“To Jepson” 116).

41 Pound’s comment here is strangely akin to Wells’s notion of the Open Conspiracy.
Pound did reply to Chesterton’s attack, but his reply, while belligerent, is surprisingly uninteresting. Pound’s basic thesis is that there is no sense arguing with “the prestigious G. K. C.” because Chesterton is so imprecise with language that he can make any word mean or not mean anything; notably, Pound entirely minimizes and misrepresents the central issue, his own attack on democracy (Pound “The Crusades” 94).

English distrusts the idea of intentionality and the idea of community and seeks to show both that a joke cannot successfully control its reception and that the kind of community-building work that jokes perform ultimately repressive, as it depends on exclusionary tactics (cf. 14, 29, 38). However, if English’s theory is stripped of its poststructuralist distrust of authorship and communities, it strikingly resembles Chesterton’s theory of humor.

For the sake of my study, it is a shame that this literary quarrel did not erupt into a full-blown controversy. Eliot was infuriated by Chesterton’s article and wrote him an angry letter in which he quite correctly insisted that that he had never said anything about Chesterton’s alliteration and quite absurdly insisted that he was not a snob. Eliot, however, did not publish the letter, and Chesterton replied with a letter in which he observed that he stood in relation to the modernists as “the Oldest Inhabitant in the bar parlour” to the “brighter lads of the village” who have “guyed” him, but generally defused tensions (“To Eliot”).

Chesterton refers to the fundamental falsehood of the modern novel in comparison with more popular forms in some of the autobiography’s better jokes. For instance, after relating his childhood love of the fairy plays of the toy theatre, he refers to the “ruthless realistic modern story”’s contempt for such love of fairy tales and romances. Chesterton then comically assures his readers that, fortunately, we are not reading “a ruthless realistic modern story. On the contrary, it is a true story” (Autobiography 54). Near the end of the autobiography he also discusses “the newest poets”—by whom, as his essay “On the New Poetry” suggests, he means those influenced by Pound and Eliot—as embodying a fundamentally false and nihilistic view of the material world (Chesterton Autobiography 326, “On the New Poetry” 44).

As Carey discusses at some length in “The Suburbs and the Clerks,” for the modernists the middle classes are, if anything, more contemptible and more truly a mass than the lower classes.

I have already discussed Chesterton’s other anxieties, but he does worry in his autobiography and other late work that newspapers are ceasing to be a truly democratic, truly mass means of communication. He speaks glowingly of journalism as he has known it, but wonders if that day has passed. He fears that the lower classes are shifting to the radio as an information source, and that newspaper consolidation and the consequent decline of competition are creating papers that speak for the owners rather than the readers (Chesterton Autobiography 177-78, 230, “Documents” 1003).

The point is seen most clearly in the story “The Ghost of Gideon Wise.” Early in the story, a communist conspirator Elias observes that, “Priests belonged, as Marx has shown, to the feudal stage of economic development . . . The part once played by the priest is now played by the capitalist expert” (“Ghost” 447). In the course of the story, however, the scientific investigator “Mr. Nares” fails to properly identify the criminal and Father Brown does, exactly reversing Elias’s observation.

The Father Brown stories are often seen as Chesterton’s primary merit even by his more critical reviewers. Julius West calls Father Brown Chesterton’s “completest and most human creation” (51). Bullett says none of Chesterton’s characters really live except Father Brown, who is “first rate” (187, 197).

“The Insoluble Problem” is the title of the final story of the final Father Brown collection published in Chesterton’s lifetime. The Scandal of Father Brown was published in 1935, as Chesterton was working on his autobiography. The volume’s opening story expresses Chesterton’s awareness that full control over the story of one’s life is impossible, and the final paragraph of “The Insoluble Problem” is linguistically echoed in the final paragraph of the autobiography (“Scandal” 602-3, “Insoluble” 704, Autobiography 330-31). In “The Insoluble Problem” Father Brown both solves a seemingly unsolvable mystery, protecting a holy relic in the process, and reflects on Christ and the Catholic Church, the “one solution” to the “Insoluble Problem,” the “enigma” that is “the universe” (704).
CONCLUSION

THE MAHATMA AS MAN OF LETTERS:
MOHANDAS GANDHI’S *AUTOBIOGRAPHY* AND THE ORIENTALIZING OF
SAGE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

With Chesterton and Wells’s autobiographies, the sage autobiography seems to have reached a terminus. The demands of narrating oneself as a sage, never easily and rarely steadily borne, have become more or less unbearable. As Edwardians writing in a modernist epoch and as generalists writing for a professionalized society, Wells and Chesterton preserve some portion of their interpretive authority only by pushing the logic of sage autobiography so far that it begins to break. In Wells’s *H. G. Wells in Love*, the passive reader that the sage autobiography attempts to both summon and create ultimately becomes a futuristic fantasy, the ideal “Lover Shadow” reading Wells in some distant Wellsian world. In Chesterton’s *Autobiography*, the all-interpreting author whose authority the sage autobiography attempts to both restore and maintain ultimately becomes a present fiction, the popular “Father Brown” reading the signs of the times with an authority that readers will no longer grant Chesterton himself. Both Wells’s and Chesterton’s attempts to preserve their authority—Wells by refusing to accept the present audience’s mixed reaction to his work, Chesterton by acknowledging and then
reinterpreting the audience’s reaction—result in the claims of the sage autobiography being displaced into the realm of fiction, and it is as authors of fiction that Wells and Chesterton retain whatever influence they possess on the general reader. As both the sage discourse and autobiography depend on an appeal to referentiality for their rhetorical effect, the endings of *H. G. Wells in Love* and *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* seem to announce the end of the sage autobiography as such.

Unlike many of the literary subgenres that have come and gone over the last two centuries, sage autobiography fades not just because of changing literary fashions but because of fundamental changes in the structure of Western thought. An increasingly skeptical and increasingly professionalized Western intellectual discourse trebly objects to the sage’s claim to interpret all of reality as a coherent whole on the basis of lived experience, and the sage autobiography particularly highlights the most objectionable element of this claim—the origins of the sage’s authority in subjective, lived experience. Although literary subgenres fade but rarely become completely extinct, it is hard to see how a sage autobiography could be produced under these circumstances. What future can sage autobiography have after the Edwardians if the Western intellectual tradition no longer has a place for it?

The answer to this question is as simple as it is unexpected. When the West no longer has a place for the sage, the sage moves East. The East, as Edward Said has shown, is one of Western culture’s “deepest and most recurring images of the Other,” and conceptual categories for which the West does not seem to have a place are often displaced by Western intellectuals onto an imagined Orient (1-2). For instance, following the rise of Utilitarianism, a number of German Romanticists come to imagine India as a
land of pure spirit and imagination, untainted by pragmatism or capitalism; the intellectual work performed by Romanticism now becomes a property of the Orient (Said 115). As J. J. Clark observes, one of the more common functions of the Orient in modern Western thought is to serve as a foil for a Western culture that is conceived as possessing a “central bias” toward “scientific rationalism” and “the Enlightenment project” (20, 29).

It is my assertion that as British intellectual culture comes to conceive of itself as professionalized, objective, and functionally nihilistic, it projects the traits of the generalizing, openly subjective, world-interpreting sage onto the Orient.¹ In the 1920s and 1930s, as Chesterton and Wells struggle to keep the sage tradition alive in Britain, the British press pictures the Orient—India, especially—as a land overrun by prophets who threaten Western professionalism and rationality. As Frank Beaman complains in the New Statesman for August 1921, it is difficult for the British to govern India, for India is really ruled by “divinely inspired prophets” who do not acknowledge Western “logic” but who exercise tremendous sway over the “numerous ignorant masses” (640).

No one individual in the 1920s and 1930s embodies the Oriental prophet that threatens Western culture, rule, and reason more fully than Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi perfectly exemplifies the Orientalizing of the sage, for he is a figure of marked cultural hybridity (cf. Brantlinger “Ruskin” 467), who possess the religious credentials of a Hindu mahatma and the literary style of a Victorian sage. After a very traditional Hindu childhood in India, Gandhi came into his own as thinker and cultural critic while studying law in London in the 1890s and while practicing law in British South Africa in the 1890s and 1900s.² In England in the 1890s, Gandhi enthusiastically read Carlyle’s essay “The Hero as Prophet,” which he recommended to friends for the rest of his life; he would later
read and approvingly cite many of Carlyle’s major works (Gandhi *Autobiography* 69, 299, “To Mirabehn” 336, *Hind Swaraj* 14, *Vir* 487-88).³ In South Africa in 1904, in what would prove to be a life-changing event, Gandhi discovered the work of John Ruskin. His autobiography devotes an entire chapter, the aptly titled “The Magic Spell of a Book,” to his initial encounter with Ruskin. As Gandhi tells it, *Unto This Last*, alone among all the books that he has ever read, “brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in [his] life,” causing him “to change [his] life in accord with the ideals of the book” (*Autobiography* 299, 298). In his autobiography, Gandhi depicts himself as an unconventional thinker who “believe[s] in the Hindu theory of Guru,” but who has never found a living person whom he could “enthrone” in his “heart as [his] Guru” (*Autobiography* 89); by according Ruskin alone an unquestioned influence on his thought and life, Gandhi locates himself as Ruskin’s heir, and quite deliberately places his thought in the sage tradition.

Gandhi’s autobiography, which sold well and was well reviewed in England, contributes to the Orientalizing of the sage by narrating the life of its subject as that of as an anti-imperial, anti-industrial Hero-as-Prophet. Gandhi had personally translated works by Carlyle, Ruskin, and Chesterton into his native Gujarati, and in *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth* he translates the sage autobiography as a literary form into an Indian context (cf. Gandhi *Autobiography* 299, Chadha 128, 152). In the person of Gandhi, the British idea of the “Asiatic prophet,” the Oriental sage, becomes embodied and actualized, as Gandhi appropriates the tropes of the British sage discourse for Indian nationalist use, and his Western admirers and critics identify the sage-like qualities of his writing as proof of his essentialized Oriental identity.
The outline of Gandhi’s thought is so well known as to require only a brief summary here. Gandhi, like both traditional Hinduism and the Victorian sage discourse, holds that the universe is a single, organic whole whose component elements are interconnected in ways beyond our conceiving. The spiritual totality of reality Gandhi terms “Absolute Truth”; like Kierkegaard or Newman, he considers “relative truth” to be that portion of absolute truth that a given individual understands and by which he or she lives at any one time (Autobiography xiii-xiv). Since, for Gandhi, each individual is part of, even a potential microcosm of, the larger spiritual order of the universe, each individual’s thought and practice should reflect this order (cf. Gandhi Autobiography 504, Leela Gandhi 125, Alter 38). For Gandhi, the goal of human life is to embody the hidden order of the universe, bringing the apparent chaos of matter under the rule of the spirit (cf. Alter 38-40). By a strict ascetic lifestyle, an individual can overcome his or her bondage to matter and, thereby, to all the external forces—familial, social, and political—that use material means to attempt to control and misdirect the individual’s will and spirit (cf. Gandhi Hind Swaraj 51, Leela Gandhi 107). Western civilization constitutes something of a Gandhian dystopia, since Western civilization as Gandhi conceives it constitutes the worship of matter over spirit, as Western capitalism, especially, absolutizes matter and relativizes things of the spirit, encouraging individuals to define themselves in terms of their material desires rather than their spiritual ideals. Gandhi’s famous ideals of nonviolence (“ahimsa”) and passive resistance (“satyagraha”) comprise a vision of how India can become free from British rule without succumbing to Britain’s materialism, capitalism, or militarism. He posits that if a group of people possess sufficient “control over the mind” to be indifferent to physical pain or punishment, then
no exterior force—particularly, a capitalistic Western government—can control their behavior (cf. Gandhi *Hind Swaraj* 45, 50-51, Leela Gandhi 117). If a spiritual, ascetic Indian populace peacefully refuses to obey British law, British rule in India must topple. In Gandhi’s vision, the will triumphs over external compulsion, spirit over matter, the East over the West; in the Utopian India Gandhi imagines and works to win, human polity reflects the divine order.

Gandhi, like all sages, teaches that reality forms a meaningful, unified whole, but that conventional systems of knowledge and value have fallen out of contact with reality. Consequently, he opposes both of the dominant schools of thought in early twentieth-century India, Western intellectual specialization and Hindu traditionalism. To the chagrin of his more moderate allies like Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi rejected Western education with its emphasis on intellectual specialization rather than on moral formation; he forbade his children to receive a formal, Western education, and attacked specialization on the grounds that one who believes in the “all-pervading Spirit of truth . . . cannot afford to keep out of any field of life” (*Autobiography* 199-202, 504). To the chagrin of orthodox Hindus, Gandhi exercised a level of interpretive authority that Hindu tradition does not allot to any individual thinker, as he rejected even elements of Hinduism itself (such as untouchability) that he could not reconcile with his philosophy; as Milton Eder notes, Gandhi angered orthodox Hindus by “appropriat[ing] the interpreter’s role from [Indian] religious specialists who remained in compliance with traditional Indian religious values” (79).

Gandhi, skeptical of both industrial Western and traditional Hindu values, addresses his English and Indian audiences with the confrontational rhetorical posture
that is the hallmark of the sage discourse. Although Gandhi is so famous as a populist and democratic leader that it is counter-intuitive to view him in these terms, his vision of the author/audience relation is not far from that of Carlyle. Gandhi’s most important work of political and cultural theory, *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule), attempts to persuade educated Indians to throw off British rule, British thought, and British civilization by means that (according to Gandhi) are truly Indian: passive resistance, cottage industry, and religious idealism. Gandhi attempts to prove that Western civilization is not worthy to be called a civilization, for “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty,” and Western civilization has failed to do so (*Hind Swaraj* 35). *Hind Swaraj* is written in the form of a dialogue between “Editor” and “Reader,” and both the relationship between the work’s “Editor” and “Reader” and the work’s stress on duty seem to echo the Carlyle of the *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. Like Carlyle’s unnamed speaker in the “Nigger Question,” Gandhi’s “Editor” repeatedly attacks the “Reader”’s beliefs, assumes that the Reader is “prejudiced against” him, and insists that he must in good conscience “say unpleasant things” that the Reader dreads to hear (*Hind Swaraj* 8). Like the later Carlyle, the Editor considers the misconceptions from which he must free the reader to be due in part to the influence of mass-market literature, as “formerly, only a few men wrote valuable books. Now, anybody writes and prints anything he likes and poisons people’s minds” (Gandhi *Hind Swaraj* 17, cf. 15).

Gandhi’s imagined audience for much of his work, including *Hind Swaraj*, is the educated, Westernized sector of the Indian community. Like Chesterton, Gandhi believes that, although the educated classes have been contaminated by their acceptance
of a false philosophy, the masses, who have been intellectually formed by the wisdom of ancient traditions, retain their sound judgment (cf. *Hind Swaraj* 3, 12, 37). His words for the masses in *Hind Swaraj* are as kind as his words for his educated “Reader” are harsh. As was the case with Chesterton, whose writings played a role in inspiring him to write *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi’s right to speak for the masses was uncontested by both his friends and most of his foes; Jawaharlal Nehru said that Gandhi is India and the British press depicted him as the personification of the Indian masses (cf. Leela Gandhi 137). It follows, then, that, like Chesterton’s authority, Gandhi’s authority rests on whether his interpretations of the masses prove good, on whether the masses act as he predicts that they will. Gandhi’s primary prediction of the behavior of the Indian masses is that they will obediently follow his leadership.

In the “Hero as Prophet” essay that Gandhi so loved, Carlyle argues that “the most significant feature in the history of an epoch is the manner it has of welcoming a Great Man” (43); correspondingly, for Gandhi one of the primary signs of the basically incorrupt nature of the Indian masses is their hero-worship, their ability to recognize and follow a hero or moral exemplar. Gandhi considers Western Christianity’s idea of original sin to be a fundamental philosophical error, and in his model of audience he is essentially an optimistic and universalistic version of Carlyle: since human nature is essentially good, everyone (at least among the masses) belongs to the elect and, therefore, everyone will follow the true prophet. As Gandhi writes in September 1917:

It is said that that it is a very difficult, if not altogether impossible, task to educate ignorant peasants in satyagraha [Gandhi’s term for passive resistance; he thought the English term sounded cowardly] and that it is full of perils . . . . Both arguments are just silly. . . . India has knowledge of dharma, and where there is knowledge of dharma, satyagraha is a very simple matter . . . *This great people*
overflows with faith. It is no difficult matter to lead such a people to the right path of satyagraha. . . . People in general always will follow in the footsteps of the noble. . . . The birth of such a man [as “a satyagrahi leader”] can bring about the salvation of India in no time. (“Satyagraha—Not Passive Resistance” 128-29, emphasis mine)

Gandhi thus posits the ability of Indian masses to follow a true prophet as a sign of the truth of his philosophical system; it reveals, especially, the spiritual nature of the East as opposed to the materialistic nature of the West, and the selfless nature of the East as opposed to the selfish ideologies of the West. As he observes more briefly in a later essay, his “faith in the people is boundless” because “theirs is an amazingly responsive nature” (“Democracy” 139).11

Although the British authorities did not care much for Gandhi’s influence, they were less afraid of the possibility that he ruled the masses than of the possibility that he was accidentally rendering the masses both prone to violence and unable to be ruled by anyone—even himself. Training in lawbreaking, they feared, becomes training in anarchy. With Gandhi, at least they could negotiate; it was impossible to come to terms with an anarchic mob. Gandhi was very sensitive to this charge, and refuted it vigorously. He writes in September 1917, “Some people have a fear that once people get involved in satyagraha, they may at a later stage take to arms. This fear is illusory. From the path of satyagraha [clinging to truth] a transition to the path of asatyagraha [clinging to untruth] is impossible” (“Satyagraha—Not Passive Resistance” 128-29). He insists that the true passive resister is a disciplined ascetic who, from a long habit of following God’s laws, is capable of judging which human laws ought to be broken (cf. Gandhi Hind Swaraj 48-51). Hence, the passive resister is not a threat to the very idea of authority; he or she is a threat only to a civil government whose rule has become false. He insists that,
since his own ideas reflect absolute Truth, his followers will obey the guidelines he has set for passive resistance, even if they did not obey the government. Like Carlyle and Chesterton, Gandhi has put forth a theory of audience that is potentially falsifiable; unlike the “Reader” or the hypothetical masses in Hind Swaraj, his actual readers and the actual masses are free to do otherwise than he commands. If the masses do not listen to him and instead behave violently, riotously, and anarchically, then Gandhi’s system is wrong on its own terms: the East is not more spiritually enlightened than the West, people are not inherently good, and Gandhi is not a true prophet. Gandhi writes his autobiography in part to respond to a trauma of exactly this nature, an event that seems to confirm his inability to rule the masses.

A full discussion of Gandhi’s autobiography would be outside my purpose here. From page one, the work explicitly conforms to the tropes of sage autobiography. The subtitle “The Story of My Experiments With Truth,” strikes a Wellsian note, and throughout the autobiography Gandhi employs scientific rhetoric to explain both how he can be a sage in the modern age and why alterations in his opinions should not harm his credibility. Gandhi’s life “consists of nothing but” his “numerous experiments with truth” and, like any good scientist, he subjects his conclusions to rigorous analysis, testing, and reappraisal, a methodology that, he suggests, should not discredit him, but, rather, cause his interpretations of reality to be taken all the more seriously (Gandhi Autobiography xii-xiii, cf. Alter 22-23). As I have shown, Gandhi, like Newman, believes that his ideas are partial but fundamentally accurate expressions of transcendent reality; by a similar token, Gandhi’s autobiography, like Newman’s, relates its author’s life as the story of how an individual’s subjective, “relative” truth comes to ever more
closely approximate transcendent, “absolute” truth.12 Like all sage autobiographies, Gandhi’s autobiography wishes to show its author to be “a worshipper of truth,” and so must narrate and interpret incidents that the author would rather ignore or, if possible, suppress (8).

The central trauma of Gandhi’s autobiography occurs when, like the other sages, he is confronted with an incident of reader (or audience) reception for which his sage system cannot account. In March 1919, Gandhi summoned the Indian peasantry to passive resistance against the Rowlatt Acts, which extended indefinitely the British authorities’ wartime restrictions on Indian civil liberties, and they instead rioted and perpetrated numerous acts of violence. Gandhi had repeatedly claimed that his followers would never resort to violence, and the behavior of the protesters initially seemed to vindicate his confidence. As Gandhi’s autobiography relates the incident, the protesters at first display a positively Carlylean level of self-control and reverence for their hero. They show their displeasure with the law simply by selling copies of Gandhi’s “proscribed” books (*Hind Swaraj* and *Sarvodaya*, a “Gujarati adaptation of Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*”) and by observing a hartal (a national day of prayer and fasting) that Gandhi has organized (*Autobiography* 462, 460). Trouble begins when Gandhi, attempting to investigate rumors of police violence against his followers, finds himself placed under arrest (*Autobiography* 463). Although he is quickly released, an angry mob even more quickly gathers to protest his imprisonment, and is mercilessly beaten by the police. The newly released Gandhi arrives in time to personally witnesses the police force’s excessive brutality, and then visits police “Commissioner Mr. Griffit[h]” to object formally to it (*Autobiography* 466).
In Gandhi’s autobiography, Commissioner Griffith’s defense of his actions serves as a recapitulation of the British critique of Gandhi’s philosophy, and Gandhi’s reply to the commissioner serves as a recapitulation of his response to this critique. The passage is of sufficient importance to deserve to be quoted at length. Commission Griffith argues that

“We police officers know better than you [Gandhi] the effect of your teaching on the people. . . . I tell you that the people are sure to go out of your control. Disobedience of the law will appeal to them; it is beyond them to understand the duty of keeping peaceful. I have no doubt about your intentions, but the people will not understand them. They will follow their natural instinct.”

“It is there that I [Gandhi] join issue with you,” I replied. “The people are not by nature violent but peaceful.”

And thus we argued at length. Ultimately Mr. Griffith said, “But suppose you were convinced that your teaching had been lost on the people, what would you do?”

“I would suspend civil disobedience if I were so convinced.”

(Gandhi Autobiography 466-67)

After Gandhi has granted this hypothetical point, Commissioner Griffith reveals the argumentative trap he has set for him: the point is not hypothetical. Gandhi’s followers have violently rioted in both Amristar and Ahmedabad (Autobiography 467). Gandhi is at first reluctant to believe this report, replying that he “should be deeply pained and surprised, if [he] found that there were disturbances in Ahmedabad,” a city which is both the location of his ashram (religious commune) and the center of his movement (Autobiography 467). However, Gandhi shortly learns that the reports of mob violence in Ahmedabad and elsewhere are all too true. In Ahmedabad “the mill-hands”—as a class devoted followers of Gandhi—“ha[ve] gone mad . . . and committed acts of violence, and a sergeant ha[s] been done to death” (Autobiography 468). Upon viewing the situation in Ahmedabad for himself, Gandhi keeps his word to Commissioner Griffith, and
“suspend[s] Satyagraha” because “the people ha[ve] not learned the lesson of peace” 
(Autobiography 468-69). As Gandhi explains his decisions, a person who cannot “keep
the people within the limited non-violence expected of them” has no right to lead passive
resistance; since the masses have failed to obey him, he has, by his own conviction, lost
his right to act (Autobiography 469).

Gandhi has been caught entirely off-guard by the disturbances at Ahmedabad, and
is traumatized at the failure of the Indian masses to live up to his model of audience.13
His loss of authority soon snowballs, as the story of his failed passive resistance
campaign is told through India and England. The British press, especially, uses the
violence at Ahmedabad and Amristar to discredit Gandhi and his philosophy, depicting
Gandhi as a weak, misguided idealist incapable of controlling his own followers. The
Times, for instance, writes that Gandhi has been “deeply shocked” by the course of events
and has now realized “that while it is easy to start an emotional campaign in India it is
quite another matter to control its course” (“Good” 11, Chirol 11). Radical Indian
nationalists also narrate the incident as evidence that Gandhi is unfit to lead; they argue
that his moral scruples have ruined what promised to be a forceful uprising against
British rule (Autobiography 469). Gandhi himself initially relates the incident to his
discredit, and publicly calls the whole campaign a “Himalayan miscalculation” on his
part; this “confession” of fault only brings him more public “ridicule” (Autobiography
469). Gandhi’s theories have been discredited by the mass’s failure to behave as he had
predicted, and as result he is mocked by the British, the nationalists, and even himself.

When Gandhi finds himself discredited by his reader reception and, as a result,
interpreted widely and negatively in the press, he faces the sort of intertextual trauma
common to all the sages in this study. Gandhi’s method of dealing with this trauma, however, is unique, even, to Western eyes, bizarre. As his autobiography relates, he recovers his authority as a sage by fasting. He holds a mass meeting of his followers at his Ashram, “tries to bring home to the people a sense of their wrong, and declare[s] a penitential fast of three days for [him]self” (Autobiography 468). He insists that he sees his “duty as clear as daylight”; although he objected to the rioting, as the leader of those who rioted, he is “a sharer in their guilt,” and he will purge himself of this guilt by fasting (Gandhi Autobiography 468).

Gandhi’s decision to fast—and to emphasize the fast in his autobiography—may seem obscure at first, but fasting constitutes a means by which he can both explain the disaster at Ahmedabad within the terms of his philosophical system and symbolically restore his authority. If, as he repeatedly insists, Gandhi himself is to blame for the faults of his followers, then the violence at Ahmedabad and Amristar does not prove that the masses are anarchists whom Gandhi cannot rule. It suggests, instead, that Gandhi rules the masses so completely that any misdeed of theirs must invariably reflect some fault of his. Gandhi believes that the self can be purified, the spirit made to control the body, through ascetic practices such as fasting. If the fault for the Ahmedabad disaster lies with Gandhi, through fasting he can purify whatever part of himself was responsible for this mistake. By fasting, Gandhi gains a sense of agency over events that seemed to have passed beyond his control (cf. Jordens 202), and turns his “Himalayan miscalculation” into another of his experiments with truth, another step in his slow progression towards complete spiritual purity and complete understanding of reality as a whole.¹⁴ As he asserts quite explicitly, in the larger context of his relentless quest for “Absolute Truth,”
“even [his] Himalayan blunders . . . see[m] trifling” (Autobiography xiv). In short, if Gandhi has failed because he has not been the perfect leader and the perfect ascetic, then his failure is, essentially, that he has not been perfectly Gandhi, and can be fixed by the very Gandhian device of fasting. In his fasts, Gandhi literalizes and materializes the damage the sage suffers when his words do not effect what they signify; by means of his fasts, Gandhi in a terribly literally way performs the work of sage autobiography, as he reenacts the trauma he has experienced, and deprives it of its force by taking it into himself and making it part of himself.

While Gandhi’s fasts as depicted in his autobiography enable him both, psychologically, to acquire a sense of mastery over the reception of his work and, symbolically, to absorb his intertextual trauma into his sage system, they would seem to be of little material or even rhetorical use. To put the point bluntly, whether Gandhi feasts like a glutton or starves himself to death, what possible bearing can his eating habits have on his reader reception? And what role can his autobiography, which in its final third thrice narrates Gandhi resorting to fasting when his words fail to effect what they signify, play in restoring his authority if it attempts to do so by means so dubious as a rhetorical appeal to fasting? I have shown that in Wells’s and Chesterton’s autobiographies either the sage or the sage’s audience is ultimately fictionalized; Gandhi’s accounts of his fasts would seem to narrate in a more literal form the gradual diminishment of the sage figure. Gandhi’s transposition of the sage discourse to India would, then, be a mere literary curiosity, and his work the vestigial survival of a historically and philosophically doomed literary form.
None of the sages, however, believed in historical determinism, and, in fact, this seemingly inevitable conclusion does not transpire. Surprisingly, in Gandhi’s autobiography his fasts do change his reader—or audience—response and Gandhi’s autobiography does improve his literary reputation in both India and England. Each of the times Gandhi resorts to fasting in his autobiography—the “Himalayan blunder” is the last and most important instance—his auditors respond. In the first instance, two members of Gandhi’s ashram ignore his strictures about celibacy and experience an unspecified but apparently sexual “moral fall,” and Gandhi reacts to the situation by undergoing a seven-day fast, both to atone for whatever part he as their teacher had in their sin and to show the extent of his “distress” at their deed (Autobiography 342). All the inhabitants of the Ashram are upset by Gandhi’s fast, and vow to avoid sin; as a result the community is purified and “the bond that b[i]nd[s] [him] to the boys and girls bec[o]me[s] stronger and truer” (Autobiography 343). In the second instance, striking millworkers that Gandhi has organized are about to abandon their strike or else in desperation resort to “rowdyism,” and Gandhi responds by pledging that “unless the strikers rally and continue the strike till a settlement is reached, or till they leave the mills altogether, [he] will not touch any food” (Autobiography 431). The strikers immediately beg his forgiveness and implore him not to fast; Gandhi ignores their pleas and fasts anyway, and the strike is resolved on favorable terms in three days (Autobiography 431). By the same token, Gandhi’s final fast in the volume also causes his fortunes to turn: as he fasts, he comes to understand the exact nature of his mistake (he had “launch[ed] . . . civil disobedience prematurely,” before the people were sufficiently trained in the ways of Gandhian satyagraha), and to envision a new plan of organization that will prevent the
mistake from reoccurring (he needs both a magazine and an elite “band of well-tried, pure-hearted volunteers” to train the masses more thoroughly in his principles) (Autobiography 470-73). Gandhi himself said that his early fasts were partly intended to influence the behavior of “those who have faith” in him (qtd. in Jordens 204). Perhaps because Hinduism venerates the memory of several holy men who engaged in fasts intended to inspire guilt and, thereby, repentance in the people, Gandhi’s early fasts did, in historical fact, have the effect on his audience that he desired (Jordens 213-14). Fasting thus provides not just a symbolic but a literal restoration of Gandhi’s authority over his audience.

Although Gandhi was leading a nonviolent rebellion against British rule at the time, his autobiography received a surprisingly favorable reception in England, due in part to a general fascination with Gandhi’s ascetic, Oriental otherness. An abridged version of Gandhi’s autobiography was published in England in October 1931 under the title of Mahatma Gandhi: His Own Story. It would be difficult to overstate the critical accolades the work received. For instance, The Christian Century deemed it “one of the most powerful books of all time” and the New Statesman predicted that it was bound to be “among the classics of autobiography” (“Gandhi—Himself” 1345; “Gandhi and His Creed” 24, 25).

Fascinatingly, though the work is packaged so as to announce both its Oriental character and its similarity to the Victorian sage tradition—John Holmes’s introduction both proclaims that “no man” is “more Oriental” than Gandhi and dubs the work Gandhi’s “apologia pro vita sua” (17, 32)—the prophetic elements of the work were read (and enjoyed) in an almost exclusively Oriental register. 15 The Christian Century, for
instance, both praises Gandhi’s “gradual incarnation” of his own ideals, and favorably contrasts him with Europe as a whole (“Gandhi—Himself” 1345). The *London Times* applauds the work for the same characteristics (“Gandhi’s Life”). Kenneth Saunders, reviewing the book for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, is moved by its depiction of Gandhi as a “social reformer” who is motivated only by “the pursuit of the realization of truth, or salvation,” and hails Gandhi as an “Asiatic prophet” who lives out ideals about which Westerners only dream (174).

The autobiographies of Chesterton and Wells were, like the autobiography of Gandhi, published in England in the early to mid-1930s, and many of the same periodicals that applaud Gandhi’s assertion that his life serves as an illustration of his theories mock this assertion when it is made by Chesterton or Wells. Only T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion*, faithfully reflecting its editor’s hatred of all sages and generalists, recognizes the affinities between Gandhi’s autobiography and the Victorian and Edwardian sage tradition. In one of the few negative reviews of the work, the *Criterion*’s reviewer mocks, “What a jumble of dead dogma is patched together in his [Gandhi’s] mind: Ruskin, Tolstoy, Emerson . . . the paragon of the arts and crafts! Yet he is a prophet by the only proof extant: he is accepted” (Cordington 358). The exception proves the rule: since the Truth (with a capital T) is by the 1930s no longer a legitimate Western intellectual concept, no Western intellectual can validly discuss, and narrate his life in terms of, Absolute Truth; since the East is imagined as the opposite of the West, the Oriental, however, *can* claim to know the Truth. The *New Statesman* review of Gandhi’s autobiography most plainly evidences this dynamic. The *New Statesman*’s reviewer does
not fault Gandhi for his insistence that his life is an expression of the “truth,” but worries that it will confuse “the Western reader” (“Gandhi and His Creed” 25).17

The sage, always rhetorically a figure speaking from the margins of British society, is now literally a figure speaking from the margins of the Empire. As J. J. Clark notes, following World War I Western intellectuals came to question the validity of Western civilization, and began to look to the East for alternate models of civilization that could suggest how to repair the “lack of spiritual purpose” that now marked the West (96-97, 110). In the wake of World War I, many Westerners came to look to Gandhi, a deeply religious Indian pacifist, as the embodiment of the solution to the problems of the secularized, war-ridden West. Most do not seem to have realized that they were seeking in Gandhi and in Gandhi’s autobiography—by far his best-selling work in the West—the sense of a coherent universe that they mocked when it was asserted by the Victorian and Edwardian sages, and that Gandhi himself was heavily influenced by the very sages they scorned. As in the inter-war period the West displaced its need for transcendent meaning onto the East, from Gandhi on the role of the sage—and, consequently, the sage autobiography—is commonly an Eastern property. While in the second half of the twentieth century Westerners like C. S. Lewis (Surprised by Joy) and Billy Graham (Autobiography) would write best-selling autobiographies that depict the authors’ lives as evidence for their metaphysical beliefs, these works would be read primarily by the authors’ co-religionists, and so would function more as affirmative Wisdom Literature than as confrontational sage writing. The British sage autobiography ceases with Chesterton and Wells. The postcolonial sage autobiography would, however, remain. Gandhi’s autobiography would be followed and built upon by important sage
autobiographies by the Dalai Lama (whose autobiography calls Gandhi “perhaps the greatest [soul] of our age” (146)), Paramhansa Yogananda (whose autobiography devotes an entire chapter to his relationship with Gandhi (434-53)), Mother Teresa (whose autobiography also contains the seemingly inevitable nod to Gandhi (118)), and others. In Gandhi the sage autobiography dies as a Western form and is reborn as an Eastern form that, with no small amount of influence and popularity, still lives on.

1 On the general tendency to contrast a mystical East with a rationalistic West, see also Said’s remark that for the French Orientalist Massigon, the Western man “was obliged to get from the Orient what he had lost in spirituality, traditional values, and the like” (270-71).
2 As Gandhi recounts in his autobiography, in England, his vegetarianism progressed from being a vow he had made to his mother to being an ethical position; in England, his Hinduism progressed from a habit to a conviction as, under the influence of “two Theosophists,” he read the Hindu scriptures for the first time; in South Africa, he became a pacifist in theory as well as practice after reading Tolstoy’s The Kingdom of God is Within You (48, 67, 137). See also Milton Eder’s observation that “While Indian and English identities were increasingly opposed in the popular English language discourse of the interwar period when Gandhi wrote his autobiography, Gandhi relates experiences in which Indian and British cultural values intersect paradoxically” (74).
3 Our knowledge of what Gandhi read is incomplete, but we do know that, over the course of a busy life that, by his own admission, included “very little time for reading,” he read several of Carlyle’s major works, particularly Heroes and Hero-Worship, The French Revolution, and Past and Present (Gandhi Autobiography 299, Vir 487-88). Gandhi uses Carlyle as an important source in his critique of Western civilization, Hind Swaraj (cf. Hind Swaraj 14, “My Third” 241).
4 For a good summary of Gandhi thought on these subjects, see J. T. F. Jordens’s book Gandhi’s Religion: A Homespun Shawl, pg. 247.
5 See, for instance, his remarks in Hind Swaraj that the defenders of Western civilization “make bodily welfare the object of life” and hold “Money” as “their God” and that Western civilization is fundamentally “Satanic” (17, 20). Ruskin’s influence on Gandhi’s thought on this subject should be apparent.
6 See, for instance, the Reader’s defense in Hind Swaraj of “the education” he has “received” (12). The reader’s use of “the works of Spencer, Mill, and others” in an attempt to refute the Editor seems to indicate the secularized, Western nature of the Reader’s education (Hind Swaraj 12).
7 On both Gandhi’s imagined audience, and his view of the masses, see his remarks in the preface to Hind Swaraj: “The views I venture to place before the reader are, needless to say, held by many Indians not touched by what is known as civilization” (3). See also the Editor’s comment that “the whole of India is not touched [by slavery to Britain]. Those alone who have been affected by Western civilization have become enslaved. We [the educated] measure the universe by our own miserable foot-rule . . . Because we are in an abject condition, we think that the whole universe is enslaved” (Hind Swaraj 37).
8 On Chesterton’s influence on Hind Swaraj, see Chadha pgs, 152-54, 160.
9 On the British press’s treatment of Gandhi, see, for example, Beaman’s claim that Gandhi “expresses better than any prominent Indian of latter days the average mind, the average soul of the great bulk of the Indian people” (25).
10 See Gandhi’s statement in “Answers to Zamindars” that a basic idea of the “West” that is “fundamentally different” from Indian thought “is their belief in the essential selfishness of human nature. I do not subscribe to it, for I know that the essential difference between man and brute is that the former can
respond to the call of the spirit in him and can rise superior to the passions that he owns in common with the brute and therefore superior to selfishness and violence which belong to brute nature and not to the immortal spirit of man” (239).

11 Although many commentators have created a Gandhi made in their own image, as Joseph Alter notes with some understatement, Gandhi was not a democrat (51). Shortly before writing his autobiography, in fact, Gandhi was facing charges that he exercised what amounted to a “moral dictatorship” of the Indian National Congress (Chadha 250).

12 On this point, see Gandhi’s comment in the introduction to his autobiography, “I worship God as truth only. I have not found Him, but I am seeking after Him. . . . But as long as I have not realized this Absolute truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I conceived it. That relative truth must, necessarily, be my shield and buckler. Though this path is strait and narrow and sharp as the razor’s edge, for me it has been the quickest and easiest . . . For the path has saved me from coming to grief, and I have gone forward according to my light. Often in my progress I have had faint glimpses of the Absolute Truth, God” (xiv).

13 The level of Gandhi’s trauma is suggested by the fact that a full year and a half later he is still writing essays that have Carlylean titles like “Democracy vs. Mobocracy”, that rave against the “tendency” of Indian leaders “to yield to the rule of the mob,” and that cite the events of “10 April 1919 . . . at Ahmedabad” as an example of “mob rule” (137).

14 Among critics, Leela Gandhi most convincingly explains this element of Gandhian thought. On the rhetorical role of Gandhi’s public fasts, she observes that “the first product of Gandhi’s exhibitionist action . . . is the performative, spectacular, politicized, and metonymical Gandhian body that acts and suffers on behalf of the nation and continually exposes, in the interests of “truth,” its inadequacies to the public gaze. This is a body whose political agency is constitutively masochistic and public” (Leela Gandhi 136). On the tie between Gandhi’s asceticism and his sense of agency, she posits that “In Gandhi’s modifications of Kantian thought, the work of rational self-defense is conducted through the relentless discipline of self-constraint which, as Richard Gregg puts it, ‘gives a sense of control over exterior forces’” (Leela Gandhi 108).

15 While the reviewers occasionally mention Gandhi’s familiarity with Western thinkers such as Tolstoy and Ruskin, they almost invariably minimize the importance of this information, as it does not fit their general stress on Gandhi’s otherness. See, for instance, the New Statesman review, which mentions in passing Gandhi’s knowledge of Carlyle, but primarily stresses that he grew up in “a region almost untouched by Western influences” and that his life and works defy any Western attempt at “explanation” (“Gandhi and His Creed” 25).

16 See, for example, Sydney Dark’s review of Chesterton’s Autobiography and the London Times review of Wells’s Experiment in Autobiography.

17 Gandhi himself contributes in his autobiography to the sense that the sage can no longer be a Western phenomenon. He writes of his friend Henry Polak, who introduced him to the work of Ruskin, “He knew Ruskin much better than I, but his Western surroundings were a bar against translating Ruskin’s teaching immediately into practice” (Autobiography 307-8). Gandhi seems to suggest that even the ideals of British prophets can be embodied and lived out only by an Eastern thinker.

18 Yogananda is best known as the man who introduced the West to yoga and yogic spirituality.

19 I should note here that I am aware that 1. Mother Teresa was born in Europe and 2. Mother Teresa never wrote an autobiography. However, Mother Teresa’s reputation (and authority) stems not from her origin in Europe but from her adopted position as a servant and citizen of India. And, although she never wrote an autobiography, she was involved with a book (A Simple Path) that her publishers insist on billing as an autobiography (though it contains relatively little autobiographical material). The publisher’s compulsion to supply the autobiography she never wrote itself suggests the inevitability of an autobiography for a figure of her type and stature.
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