Puritanism and Modernist Novels

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CHAPTER THREE

Historical Context

The Legacy of Puritanism in the Late Nineteenth Century

To many early modernists, Puritanism had thoroughly infiltrated English society and culture and negatively shaped the historical trajectory of England as a nation. Their reaction to Puritanism in the novel is inextricably tied to their reaction to Puritanism in their own context. This chapter gives a historical-contextual snapshot of the legacy of Puritanism at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. Because outlining the extent to which Puritanism continued to shape English culture would take volumes, this chapter gives only a brief historical picture of Nonconformist Christianity in these decades. It spends some time on how Nonconformist Christianity was lived and on how it was stereotypically perceived. It also discusses Nonconformist Bible-reading practices and debates over reading. Finally, it examines the views of Puritanism held by two very influential nineteenth-century thinkers—John Henry Newman and Matthew Arnold.

According to the historian Dale A. Johnson, English Nonconformity was “transformed” over the course of the nineteenth century. With the label of “Dissent” at the beginning of the century, Nonconformity “bore the marks of exclusion from the established Church of England and the larger society through inherited disabilities and the accumulated scorn of most Anglicans” (4). By the end of the century, the disabilities in politics, education, and church obligations (having to be baptized, married, and buried in an Anglican church, for example) that Nonconformists “endured since the Restoration” had gradually been removed or were
in the process of being removed (4). Nonconformists over the course of the century participated increasingly in economics and developed a stronghold in the middle class. Indeed, in the last quarter of the century, Nonconformity essentially dominated Britain’s world ascendancy. Johnson argues that Nonconformist churches were reinvigorated by the Evangelical Revival of mid-century. This new energy led to: increased church attendance and allegiance; the formation of more voluntary church-based societies; more organized denominational bodies; and better training for ministers (4). By the end of the nineteenth century, the term “Dissent” had largely been replaced by the term “Free Church,” which according to Johnson signaled Nonconformity’s “altered consciousness” about its status and its desire to participate “at every level of national and religious life” (4). Early modernists certainly reacted to the prevalence of Nonconformist influence in all areas of Victorian life.

Contrary to a typical view of early modernism, however, that might see the 1900s and 1910s as largely an experimental and rebellious period, Christianity remained the “general ethos” in Great Britain, and the United Kingdom certainly considered itself to be a “Christian country” (Robbins 46, 23). Being attached to a particular denominational identity was simply a part of life in these decades for many people. Keith Robbins characterizes the period of 1900 to 1914 as a time when this ethos was “under pressure,” however, from the challenges of modernity, including “class, gender, culture, war, nation, empire” (46–47). He discusses many trends and debates that shaped Christian churches at the turn of the century. In 1901, over 50 percent of non-Roman Catholics in England and Wales were Nonconformist (Munson 9). Nonconformist or “Free Church” denominations were seeking more unity from within, trying to inspire their various branches to join larger “unions” as well as seeking more unity ecumenically (Robbins 6). Robbins states that all Anglican archbishops were also preoccupied by the late nineteenth century with “keeping the church [of England] together” (13). Despite this, many new churches were being built, occupying “prominent physical space throughout the British Isles” (23). The term “church” usually referred to an Anglican building, while the term “chapel” referred either to a Protestant Nonconformist building or to a Catholic one. According to Robbins, Christianity in England was mostly middle class (49), and although not universally true, typically the working classes did not participate significantly in churches. How to reach the working classes and the poor was a constant concern for churches, however, and in these decades missions and settlements were cropping up in the cities to try to reach the poorer
population (54). Free churches also started to become more institutional in that they developed larger buildings and expanded programming (55).

Denominations formed their own historical societies, and church historians began documenting denominational histories. This may have been in part because as historiography became more and more a prevalent and dominant discipline in the latter half of the nineteenth century, European history was increasingly portrayed as undergoing a process of secularization, beginning in the Renaissance and continuing throughout modernity. Such historiography and the resulting period formations of the Medieval, Renaissance, and Modern became a way to narrate modernity’s breaking away from Christianity, Puritanism and the Reformation. Chapter 5 treats such historiography more thoroughly in its examination of E. M. Forster and A Room with a View, a novel that uses these historical periods as a structuring device for similar reasons—for escape.

At the turn of the century, despite Nonconformity’s success in many areas, debates continued over the Establishment of the Anglican Church and its dominance in politics. Historically, Nonconformists believed that because the Establishment was in the majority and wealthy, it never needed to consider the validity of its principles (Munson 226). The Nonconformists took it upon themselves, therefore, to question the Establishment and fight for reform. Historically, however, Nonconformists had always felt belittled and abused, not only by the Establishment in legal ways but also by Roman Catholics. In the 1900s, therefore, Nonconformity continued its quest for legitimacy, especially in raising the status of its clergy and its educational institutions. As James Munson discusses, although the Nonconformist goal of achieving disestablishment constitutionally was unrealized in 1896, in effect “legislation had given de facto disestablishment” and had removed many grievances (222). By 1900 “church” and “chapel” were basically equally established in law (222), but not equally established culturally, intellectually, or socially.

Despite the legal advances, nonconformists continued to exert political pressure on the Establishment as they responded to several decades of Anglican attacks. As the Reverend J. Guinness Rogers put it 1892, Nonconformity is “something more than a mere objection to a particular church. It is an assertion of the right of the individual conscience, a protest against invidious class privilege and distinction, an emphatic testimony on behalf of liberty and progress” (qtd. in Munson 220). In the wake of the Parnell divorce case in the late 1880s and early 1890s, which is treated more fully in chapter 6 on James Joyce and A Portrait of the
Artist as a Young Man, Nonconformists increasingly put moral pressure on Parliament. They played a key role in trying to hold church, state, and public morality together when the legitimacy and necessity of their connections were increasingly being debated. Such debates, especially regarding the role of church and state in issues of divorce and marriage, integrally shaped Ford Madox Ford’s novel, The Good Soldier. These topics are treated more completely in chapter 7. Nonconformist moral pressure in these years even led to the coining of the term “Nonconformist Conscience,” which was the centralized point of attack for modernists. Other areas in which the “Nonconformist Conscience” exerted pressure in the 1900s were over the Boer War, Irish Home Rule, and especially the Education Act of 1902. This act would have made any spiritual instruction at public schools necessarily Anglican, while taxing everyone for it no matter their denomination. Nonconformist political pressure aided the Liberal Party’s unprecedented victory in the 1906 elections, and in 1908, the first Nonconformist prime minister took office.

The spiritual or religious practices of Nonconformity were of course always intertwined with its political and moral public voice. Of most interest here are the Bible-reading practices of the Nonconformist denominations and the ways in which reading was seen to be a serious moral and spiritual endeavor. As with the early modern Puritans, Nonconformists at the end of the nineteenth century continued to have debates over the nature of fiction, reading, and character formation. In addition, the fundamental dialectic of the “Nonconformist Conscience” and its dismantling continued to shape novels, especially for those authors aware of the relation of the novel tradition to Puritanism.

In late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England, the Bible remained a leading best-selling book.¹ As Timothy Larsen outlines in A People of One Book, from the Evangelical, Anglican, or Roman Catholic, to the agnostic or atheist, most Victorians were well-versed in and knowledgeable of the Bible—the “common cultural currency of the Victorians” (2). Victorians “tended to be educated and raised in a way that immersed them in the Scriptures” (295), and many still upheld the “expectation that one would read the Bible daily, with four times—private and household in both the morning and the evening—being the ideal” (296). Intellectual debates among Victorian academics assumed biblical knowledge on all

sides. Although the “higher” or scientific biblical criticism of the nineteenth century continues to receive the most scholarly attention today, certainly typological or Puritan devotional reading as outlined in chapter 2 remained a widespread practice. As Larsen suggests, “There was a strong impulse to understand one’s life or situation by recasting it within the experience of a specific biblical character or narrative” (296). This idea that as one identifies with the biblical types one comes to understand oneself more thoroughly continued to shape personal Bible-reading practices into the twentieth century. J. B. Greenhough, who served for a while as president of the Free Church Council of the British Isles, exemplifies this approach in his 1903 *Half Hours in God’s Older Picture Gallery: A Course of Character Studies from the Old Testament*:

There is a gulf four thousand years wide between them and ourselves, and an almost greater distance in matters of race, speech, dress, occupations, modes of thought and habits of life; yet human nature is the same, whether it belongs to hoary antiquity, or to our brand new civilization. And the men of the Bible are always intensely human. . . . They are men and women the like of which we can find at any moment by stripping off the modern surface from our own lives and the lives of our neighbors. These stories always come home to us with a personal application if we know how to read them. (14)

Such a Puritan sense of typological Bible-reading and identification was likely strongest among Evangelical and Old Dissenting or Nonconformist denominations (Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist), but certainly was not limited to them. In fact, what separates the more Puritan-like groups from others is not the respective status, value, and centrality given to the Bible; indeed, all denominations in this time, even Unitarians, valued the Bible as central. Rather, what separates groups are doctrinal issues, including the question of interpretive authority. Just as in the early modern era, in the Victorian period Christians remained divided over whether or not the individual reader had the authority to interpret the truth of scripture. As E. B. Pusey put it an 1839 letter:

The Ultra-Protestants . . . assert that to be truth which each individual himself derives from Holy Scripture . . . the Ultra-Protestant believes “the
good man,” the individual, to be infallibly “guided into all truth”; . . . People can interpret Scripture as they please, in great measure, and therefore it costs them no submission. (Qtd. in Larsen, People 15)

Pusey, on the other hand, who wanted the Anglican Church to return more fully to its Catholic roots, believed people should be guided in their biblical interpretation by the collective tradition of the early church fathers (Larsen 14). Nicholas Wiseman, the first Catholic archbishop of Westminster, likewise believed the Protestant notion of “the right (indeed duty) of private judgment” was in error, for it “places on ordinary people—every individual—the impossible burden of proving the entire faith for themselves from scratch” (Larsen 51). The Protestant and Puritan are critiqued for believing themselves epistemologically self-sufficient and for being sovereign interpreters of the Bible as individuals, just as Crusoe saw himself to be.

The most famous and dominant proponent of Nonconformist reading practices in the nineteenth century certainly had to be the famous Baptist preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–1892). Deemed the Ultimus Puritanorum or “the last of the Puritans” by many (a title he repudiated), Spurgeon was one of the most outspoken and prolific preachers of the nineteenth century. He saw himself as helping “to train hundreds of men who would continue the Puritanical succession after he was gone from their midst” (Autobiography 296). He defended Calvinism, compiled a catechism for his church that he titled A Puritan Catechism, was a leading voice in many public debates, and published many books, sermons, and Bible commentaries. Spurgeon grew up reading Puritan devotional books and sermons in his grandfather’s library and avidly collected Puritan volumes his entire life. He read voraciously and was extremely well-learned. At his death he had 12,000 volumes in his library, 7,000 of which were Puritan texts (Autobiography 287). On reading Puritan theology he said in 1872:

We assert this day that, when we take down a volume of Puritan theology, we find in a solitary page more thinking and more learning, more Scripture, more real teaching, than in whole folios of the effusions of modern thought. The modern men would be rich if they possessed even the crumbs that fall from the table of the Puritans. (Qtd. in Bacon 121)

Of course reading early modern Puritan texts always took second place to reading the Bible itself. Sounding like Watson or any number of early modern Puritans, Spurgeon says this of Bible-reading:
It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible, until at last you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline, and the very essence of the Bible flows from you. Hundreds of times have I surely felt that presence of God in the pages of Scripture. (Qtd. in Bacon 109)

Spurgeon’s devotional texts continue to be published and read even today.

As others have shown, most notably George P. Landow in Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows, biblical typology continued to inform Victorian literature almost universally. One could even codify the biblical allusions made by so-called atheist Victorian authors. The general idea of moral typologies was a common literary application. The moral natures of Shakespeare’s characters, for example, were analyzed typologically in texts like James Bell’s 1894 Biblical and Shakespearean Characters Compared and Mary Cowden Clarke’s 1850 The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines. One 1873 text, Traits of Character and Notes of Incident in the Bible Story by Francis Jacox, thoroughly intersperses biblical and literary references on the premise that the moral-spiritual types presented in the Bible are universal and that “novels and poetry confirm these characteristic traits and incidents” (2). The Bible was a source of foundational moral and spiritual types that then shaped literary characters and gave readers clues for interpreting them. This seemed to be a convention no matter what an author believed about the truth of the biblical narrative.

Despite this influence of the Bible on literature, a Puritan-like fear and distrust of fiction persisted for some throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Many novelists continued to make fun of this fear and exploited it as they dismantled Puritan morality. As had happened ever since the Reformation and the emergence of the modern novel in England, Puritans in the late nineteenth century continued to voice concern over the attitudes portrayed in novels and the ways in which novels might negatively form their readers morally and spiritually, leading them away from a biblical view. Bound up in this central question of character formation was the question of the novel’s relation to truth. An 1873 text, for example, titled Youth and Its Duties: A Book for Young Gentlemen, Containing Useful Hints of the Formation of Character, by Harvey Newcomb, suggests that novels can “fill corrupt minds”

3. See also Korshin.
4. Cunningham’s Everywhere Spoken Against shows how this Puritan fear of fiction is itself an exaggerated stereotype. While certainly many Puritans felt novels were dangerous, others actually wrote novels and attempted thereby to combat the novels that falsely stereotyped dissent. Puritans took a wide range of positions on novel-reading.
with “false and dangerous principles” that are “more fascinating to the youthful heart than the example itself would be, because the mischief is artfully concealed behind the drapery of fine literary taste, and beautiful language” (183). The author goes on suggest that “It is better to read the Bible alone, than to spend time over a poor book,” and that youth should avoid the “appetite for novel reading” which can lead to a habit of “moral intoxication” (185). A 1909 text, Bible Miniatures: Character Sketches of One Hundred and Fifty Heroes and Heroines of Holy Writ by Amos R. Wells, outlines as one example the character of Eve and suggests that her plot “has been the essential plot of many a modern novel, because it is the essential plot of many a modern life: a foolishly ambitious, insanely credulous, but divinely loving and gloriously daring woman, who decides that she can get through Satan for her beloved what she and he cannot get from God.” The author goes on to suggest, however, that the biblical version of Eve’s plot is superior: “If we read our Genesis better, we need not read, at so much greater length, our Thackeray.” Clearly the novel continued to suffer a poor reputation among many Christians because unlike religious faith, fiction was not based on any sense of a shared morality or narrative.

Puritan fear of fiction may have been reinvigorated in the late nineteenth century by developments in theology. Johnson suggests that over the course of the nineteenth century, Nonconformist theology shifted over “the foundational question of religious authority” (124). At the beginning of the century there was consensus among Nonconformists that natural theology provided the objective grounds for certainty about biblical authority. In the wake of the scientific revolution, Darwinism, the higher criticism of the Bible, and increasing skepticism over the course of the century, that consensus gradually turned into a pluralism in which several theories of biblical authority were being put forth in Nonconformist circles and schools. One of these theories argued that religious experience was a ground for religious certainty, but this was often considered to be too subjective and liberal by many. While Nonconformists maintained “common commitment and purpose” in their faith, says Johnson, such a shift “must have contributed to the growing sense of unease and fragmentation” that was being expressed outside the church and slowly infiltrating it (124).

Yet while early-twentieth-century novels that portrayed this increasing religious skepticism strengthened Puritan fears about fiction for some, others saw the situation as ripe for Christian authors to step forward. For example, two papers in the 1908 volume, Pan-Anglican Papers:
Being Problems for Consideration at the Pan-Anglican Congress, published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, address recent literature’s leaning toward “skeptical speculation” (3). One paper suggests that the church need not be afraid of such literature, for it genuinely interests readers, and “indifference is worse than irreverence” (7). The other paper acknowledges how thoroughly the popular literature of the day is “concerned with religious questions” (13) and that while the “public has little sympathy for the supernatural or for clergy, law or discipline, . . . they still wish to cloak their aspirations in the trappings of religion” (15). Both authors suggest that the current climate calls for the church and Christian writers to meet the public at the level of its questioning and to be the first to address various modes of thought instead of being the first to stifle and censor them (7).

One has to remember as well that certainly not all Nonconformists were afraid of novels. Additionally, some Nonconformists throughout the nineteenth century wrote novels that maintained the Puritan emphasis on character formation. Even Spurgeon felt that novel-reading was appropriate to some degree. When asked “Should novel-reading be indulged in by ministers?,” he is noted to have replied thus (even though he had read many novels himself): “That depends on what you mean by a novel.” He cites The Pilgrim’s Progress (a text he read over one hundred times), Sir Walter Scott, and some of Dickens as worthy of reading, though the last employed “gross caricatures” of the religious life of his times. “As for the general run of novels now being issued in shoals,” he went on, “you will probably be wise to leave them alone; few of them would likely to do you any good, and many of them are morally tainted, or worse” (Autobiography 283).

Here Spurgeon participates in some of the general discourse on moral character, moral education, virtue, and character development that was prevalent throughout the nineteenth century and persisted into the twentieth. Often discussed was whether novels were appropriate reading

5. See Cunningham, Everywhere Spoken Against.

for the formation of one’s character. An 1851 text, Religion in Earnest: Designed to Aid in Forming and Perfecting the Christian Character by Silas Henn, ties virtue and biblical typology together: “You must be pious and virtuous in your own life, and must strive to promote piety and virtue in the lives of those around you” (9). While there may be disagreement among Christians on doctrinal issues, says Henn, the “possession of true religion” is marked by one who “orders his conduct . . . after the fashion of Jesus the carpenter; of Paul, the tent-maker; of Peter, the fisherman” (10). Henn goes on to argue against novel-reading, saying some prefer “obscene novel-reading to the reading of scriptures—the tales of the ungodly to the conversation of Christ and his disciples” (21). Trying to explain why the Bible may not be as popular among those who like novels, the author reveals his typological view of reading:

People dislike the scriptures, because they see in them, as in a glass, their own odious character. . . . They hate the mirror in which they see themselves so plainly. . . . Read the scriptures, and they will assist you in learning your state and danger. They will show you clearly that you are transgressors. (24)

According to this author, Bible-reading reveals a true picture of the self, the state of its conscience, and its virtue (or lack thereof), while novels lead only to a false self-image. Because novels are fictional, they help lead the reader away from reality and true knowledge of themselves and God.
Another question addressed more frequently at the turn of the century was whether religion or philosophy should be the foundation of moral character formation. At the heart of this question for Christians was the idea that morality and religion could not be seen as separate realms of knowledge. Truth and virtue are intimately linked. For example, in a 1908 lecture delivered to the ethological society titled “The Influence of Religion on Character,” the archdeacon of London, the Venerable William Sinclair, argued that religion, not philosophy, was able to “supply the motive and the power to secure” virtue and the inner life (1). While recent thinkers such as Matthew Arnold “worship” the moral law and its authority outside of religion, only Christianity, says Sinclair, “enables men to see in the world outside them the working out of their own moral aspirations” (4). Edward Lyttelton describes his 1912 book, Character and Religion, as “a contribution to the question recently come into prominence, how far are we, ordinary people, justified in believing that character can be trained on moral principles alone.” He suggests that “during the last forty years the gulf between religion and morality may be thought to have widened considerably,” yet at the same time there is now also a widespread attention to religious questions (3). Lyttelton assesses that in his day, “the adult moralist is reduced to the humiliating position of having to base the teaching of his child in what he concedes to be the first thing in life, conduct, on something which to him is of quite secondary importance”: religion (3). At the same time that moral philosophy and popular thought see morality as separable from religion, then, others argue that only in their connection will true virtue be established. As William Bruce put it in his 1902 The Formation of Christian Character, there are Christians who want to ignore the character or moral aspect of the faith, and there are others who “attend to character and ethics without Christianity” (7). According to these texts, then, MacIntyre’s claim that modernity is constituted by the separation of religion and morality is generally descriptively true, yet Puritans and others in the church had always persisted in their arguments for the inseparability of the two realms.

In sum, Puritan or Nonconformist Bible-readers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continue to have the same concerns about the novel that early modern Puritans did. They share concern for the effects of novel-reading on the reader’s personal moral and spiritual character. They believe narratives invite the reader to take a position in the story as he identifies with the character types. They believe such a process enables moral and spiritual insight regarding the reader’s own soul or conscience and can lead to change or conversion in the self. They believe
narratives can shape the reader’s desires, emotions, and values, and they worry about how much a novel’s fictional theory of history and life, as well as its questioning of religion, might draw a reader away from seeing the biblical narrative as truth. To these believers, the novel and the Bible require similar hermeneutics and have parallel moral and spiritual effects on their readers. For some, the novel is in competition with the Bible for winning souls. For some, the novelist competes with God.

Two of the most influential Victorian thinkers for the early modernists—John Henry Newman and Matthew Arnold—also see Bible-reading as analogous to novel-reading. They both critique the Puritan Bible-reading subject for being overly rational, for believing the self is sovereign epistemologically, for being too focused on the moral realm. Although Newman was a Roman Catholic writing primarily against the Protestant Anglican Establishment and Arnold was a skeptic specifically targeting Puritans, they shared many ideas. Their writings established views and theories of Protestantism and Puritanism that surely helped shape all subsequent views. Both Newman’s argument in his 1851 “Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England” and Arnold’s arguments in his 1869 Culture and Anarchy focus on critiquing Puritan hermeneutics and epistemology, the foundation of Protestant reading and interpreting. However, as they both argue against the supposed certainty of Protestant rationality and judgment as well as the stereotyping, limiting views they see being produced by Puritan interpretive practices, they both, like the novel, ironically stereotype the Puritan.

Newman’s series of “Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England,” which he considered to be among his best writings, were delivered once a week during the summer of 1851. Newman describes the purpose of the lectures thus:

I am going to inquire why it is, that, in this intelligent nation, and in this rational nineteenth century, we Catholics are so despised and hated by our own countrymen, with whom we have lived all our lives, that they are prompt to believe any story, however extravagant, that is told to our disadvantage; as if beyond a doubt we were, every one of us, either brutally deluded or preternaturally hypocritical, and they themselves, on the contrary were in comparison of us absolute specimens of sagacity, wisdom, uprightness, manly virtue, and enlightened Christianity. (1)

At one point, Newman admits that “when I use the word Protestant, I do not mean thereby all who are not Catholics, but distinctly the disciples
of the Elizabethan Tradition.” He refers to the Anglican Establishment essentially founded by Elizabeth in the sixteenth century in conjunction with the forced exile of English Catholics (170). The lectures foundationally attack Protestantism on epistemological and moral grounds and carefully dissect what Newman calls Protestant anti-Catholic “Prejudice” and “Bigotry.” Newman’s characterization of English Protestants as too hardened into their typecasting attitudes and methods is a critique of the limits of Puritan hermeneutics.

To Newman, Protestants hold their negative views of Catholics merely based on what he calls the “Protestant Tradition” which has long been ingrained in the English identity. “Our received policy, as Englishmen, our traditionary view of things, [is] to paint up the Pope and Papists in a certain style,” says Newman (10). Certain “facts” about Catholicism, which are actually falsities or fictions, are so ingrained in English Protestantism that they have become “first principles”: assumptions never questioned for their adherence to truth. This “great Protestant Tradition” of “First Principles” is made up of “many rivulets”: “the Tradition of the Court, the Tradition of the Law, the Tradition of the Legislature, the Tradition of the Establishment, the Tradition of Literature, the Tradition of Domestic Circles, the Tradition of the Populace” (120). Yet this tradition is not only of learned or professional men. It is a tradition of

nursery stories, school stories, public-house stories, club-house stories, drawing-room stories, platform stories, pulpit stories—a tradition of newspapers, magazines, reviews, pamphlets, romances, novels, poems, and light literature of all kind, literature of the day—a tradition of selections from the English classics, bits of poetry, passages of history, sermons, chance essays, extracts from books of travel, anonymous anecdotes, lectures of prophecy, statements and arguments of polemical writers, made up into small octavos for class-books, and into pretty miniatures for presents—a tradition floating in the air; which we found in being when we first came to years of reason; which has been borne in upon us by all we saw, heard, or read, in high life, in parliament, in law courts, in general society; which our fathers told us had ever been in their day; a tradition, therefore, truly universal and immemorial, and good so far as a tradition can be good, but after all, no more than a tradition is worth: I mean, requiring some ultimate authority to make it trustworthy. (84)

The “Protestant Tradition” of anti-Catholic typecasting is an inescapable aspect of being English, according to Newman, yet it lacks a foundation
of authoritative truth, and hence must be exposed as a mere cultural construct, a “waxwork,” a “fiction,” a “counterfeit” (9). Ironically, however, while Newman wants to dismantle the fictional typecasting of Catholics within Protestant discourse, he maintains his own negative stereotypical depictions of Protestants as if they were facts. I say this not to defend Protestants or Catholics, but to point out how difficult it is to dismantle a long-ingrained typological (novelistic) narrative when one is arguing from within that narrative and is therefore limited by its dialectical structure.

The main aspect of the “Protestant Tradition” that Newman attacks is its epistemology that assumes the autonomy of the individual mind. One of the most characteristic “marks or notes of a Protestant” for Newman is his “one-sidedness,” his inability to view things from a different perspective: “He has always viewed things in one light, and he cannot adapt himself to any other; he cannot throw himself into the ideas of other men, fix upon the principles on which those ideas depend, and then set himself to ascertain how those principles differ, or whether they differ at all, from those which he acts upon himself” (170). Protestants not only refuse to try to understand Catholicism or to see it in a new light, but they also refuse to be questioned themselves and to take criticism. They thereby always act out of hardened fear and remain unaware of their own limitations, according to Newman.

Most intriguingly, Newman feels that fiction has the ability to reveal knowledge about human identity which Protestants fail to see. Fiction often reveals that different people have different views of the very same things, he says:

The interest in which such an exhibition creates in the reader . . . is that each of the persons in question is living in his own world, and cannot enter the world of another, and therefore paints that other in his own way, and presents us with a caricature instead of a likeness, though he does not intend it. (6)

Fiction, in other words, exposes the processes of typecasting and helps readers to open their perspectives on people who are different from themselves. Fiction can reveal to readers their own tendencies to stereotype. Fiction thus can lead the reader to understand the limits of the self in a way that Protestants seem unable to accomplish. How like new ethical theory this sounds!

According to Newman, Protestant epistemology and hermeneutics make the individual the authority of interpretive judgment, an assump-
tion he sees as the foundation of “Prejudice”: “that narrow, ungenerous spirit which energizes and operates so widely and so unweariedly in the Protestant community” (227). For Newman, “the Prejudiced man takes it for granted, or feels an undoubted persuasion—not only that he himself is in possession of divine truth, for this is a matter of opinion, and he has a right to his own—but that we, who differ from him, are universally imposters, tyrants, hypocrites, cowards, and slaves” (227). The “Prejudiced man,” or “Protestant Scripture Reader,” as Newman also calls him, is self-sufficient to make judgments about truth and reality because the “Protestant Tradition” has naturally ingrained in him the idea that he is “the measure of everything” (227). To Newman, this is unethical and “Bigoted” and is the root of Protestantism as a “persecuting power” (209). He defines “Bigotry” as “the imposition of private reason—that is, of our own views and theories of our own First Principles, as if they were the absolute truth, and the standard of all argument, investigation, and judgment” on others, and then “treating others with scorn or hatred for not accepting them” (278). For Newman, English Protestantism’s “First Principles” are lauded “as oracles and standards of all truth,” but they are generated from the “private factory of man,” not “from the Author of our being” (279). The “Protestant Tradition” is hence flawed at its very foundation. To Newman, the sovereign Protestant self in England becomes his own source of truth, his own God.

Paradoxically, Newman’s critique of Protestantism simultaneously creates and furthers the stereotype of the “Ultra-Protestant” or “Puritan” as autonomous liberal individual. In his account, Protestantism is associated with individualism; self-sufficient rationality, judgment, and epistemology; cultural instantiation of false first principles; and social and political power, all of which need to be critiqued and dismantled. While in other writings Newman is not so harsh, these lectures create a negative view of Protestantism that influences many. George Eliot, for example, is known to have attended some of Newman’s lectures and to have been pleasantly surprised with his level of wit and sarcasm about Protestants. Like the new ethical theorist, Newman finds dramatized in fiction the Puritan processes of typecasting by epistemologically limited characters. In the process of reading, he suggests, fiction becomes the means by which one can experience something beyond the limits of the self. He seems to wish that English society, especially Protestants, could take on a more novelistic mode of reading and interpreting others, such that they could understand better the limits of their views and of themselves and move past their bigotry.
In *Culture and Anarchy* Matthew Arnold promotes “Culture,” not the Catholic Church, as the institution by which to advance England’s development, and thereby has quite different ends than Newman. Despite this, his critique of Puritanism and its effects on national life correspond to Newman’s views. In fact, Arnold makes it clear that he is continuing what Newman had begun. Arnold suggests that Newman and the Oxford Movement primarily fought against “middle-class liberalism” or the Establishment, which had for the “cardinal points of its belief”:

> The Reform Bill of 1832, and local self-government, in politics; in the social sphere, free trade, unrestricted competition, and the making of large industrial fortunes; in the religious sphere, the Dissidence of Dissent and the Protestantism of the Protestant Religion. (73)

Yet Arnold suggests that this power no longer has dominance:

> Who will estimate how much the currents of feeling created by Dr. Newman’s movement, the keen desire for beauty and sweetness which it nourished, the deep aversion it manifested to the hardness and vulgarity of middle-class liberalism, the strong light it turned on the hideous and grotesque illusions of middle-class Protestantism—who will estimate how much all these contributed to swell the tide of dissatisfaction which has mined the ground under the self-confident liberalism of the last thirty years, and has prepared the way for its sudden collapse and supersession? (74)

Arnold is most concerned to attack Puritanism specifically. He believes Puritanism developed historically in England as a counter to the “Renaissance.” It was “originally the reaction in the seventeenth century of the conscience and moral sense of our race, against the moral indifference and lax rule of conduct” that the Renascence introduced in the sixteenth century (136). In Arnold’s famous terms, it was a reaction of “Hebraism against Hellenism” (136). For Arnold, the natural movement of history was leading to the Renascence and its return to and recovery of the ancients. When Puritanism countered this movement, a “contravention of the natural order” occurred in England, the full effects and disorder of which Arnold sees as only beginning to be identified in his current day (137). The rise of early modern Puritanism is nothing like the rise of primitive Christianity. To Arnold, Christianity’s emergence and domi-
tion over Hellenism in antiquity was also the natural course of history, for “the way of mankind’s progress lay through [Christianity’s] full development” (137). When Puritanism emerged, in contrast, it was a mere “side stream” trying to overcome the natural flow of history, yet it confused itself as the “main stream of man’s advance” (137). Thus at the beginning of the seventeenth century, through this unnatural development, the English middle class “entered the prison of Puritanism, and had the key turned there upon its spirit for two hundred years” (Arnold, “Equality” 229).

Arnold sees his call for a return to Hellenism and to culture as a correction to the dominance of middle-class liberalism and Puritanism in England, especially with its incomplete ideas about man’s perfection. Echoing Newman’s sentiments, Arnold argues that

the Puritan’s great danger is that he imagines himself in possession of a rule telling him the unum necessarium, or the one thing needful, and that he remains very satisfied with a very crude conception of what this rule really is and what it tells him, thinks he has now knowledge and henceforth needs only to act, and, in this dangerous state of assurance and self-satisfaction, proceeds to give full swing to a number of the instincts of his ordinary self. (142)

Some of these instincts (e.g., man’s “animality”) the Puritan has successfully conquered, and for this the Puritan deserves some admiration, “but others which he has not conquered by this help he is so far from perceiving to need subjugation, and to be instincts of an inferior self, that he even fancies it to be his right and duty, in virtue of having conquered a limited part of himself, to give unchecked swing to the remainder” (142). He is, in other words, “a victim of Hebraism” who has cultivated a “strictness of conscience” while leaving undeveloped his “spontaneity of consciousness” (142). What the Puritan lacks for Arnold is a “larger conception of human nature” that extends beyond the moral sphere (142). The real unum necessarium, says Arnold, is that humans strive to “come to our best at all points,” not merely on moral ones (142). The result of Puritanism’s one-sided emphasis is that it justifies “vulgarity, hideousness, ignorance, violence,” instead of attending to the “full and harmonious development of ourselves” (143). Morality and religion for the Puritan become mere “machinery”—“mechanical, absolute law” (147).

In another essay, “Equality,” Arnold extends this description of the Puritan type:
Those who offer us the Puritan type of life offer us a religion not true, the claims of intellect and knowledge not satisfied, the claim of beauty not satisfied, the claim of manners not satisfied. In its strong sense for conduct that life touches truth; but its other imperfections hinder it from employing even this sense aright. The type mastered our nation for a time. Then came the reaction. . . . The type retired into our middle class, and fortified itself there. It seeks to endure, to emerge, to deny its own imperfections, to impose itself again—impossible! If we continue to live, we must outgrow it. The very class in which it is rooted, our middle class, will have to acknowledge the type’s inadequacy, will have to acknowledge the hideousness, the immense ennui of the life which this type has created, will have to transform itself thoroughly. (232)

Arnold calls for an escape from the dominant Puritan type, an escape from the categories and narratives he sees dominating English culture. His project relies on a narrative of confinement and escape.

In the end, England’s religious institutions and “the Dissidence of Dissent and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion will never bring humanity to its true goal,” which for Arnold is “a human nature complete on all sides,” morally, intellectually, aesthetically, and otherwise (“Culture” 70). It is important to note that Arnold does not condemn outright all attention to morality; indeed, he says “morality is indispensable,” and men of culture who ignore it are “punished” for that inattention. While he does not promote an amoral “culture” of aesthetics only, then, he calls for a moral sensibility tempered by intellect and beauty, a more complicated view of morality than what he sees Puritanism providing. Like Newman, Arnold sees Protestant England as engendering a view of the human subject that is too one-sided, too rational, too certain, too incomplete a picture of humanity’s potential. Arnold performs a critique or dismantling of the Puritan type and calls for a new order, but he does not outline specifically how moral-social life should be reconfigured.

Very intriguingly, Arnold spends time in Culture and Anarchy critiquing Puritan Bible-reading. Newman had seen novel-reading as potentially providing to the reader a wider perspective of the human self and truth than Protestants were able to achieve. In parallel, Arnold sees Protestant interpretation of the Bible as too narrow-minded and limited. Arnold suggests that:

Nothing is more striking than to observe in how many ways a limited conception of human nature, the notion of a one thing needful, a one
side in us to be made uppermost, the disregard of a full and harmonious
development of ourselves, tells injuriously on our thinking and acting.
(142–43)

He goes on to suggest that “the dealings of Puritanism with the writings
of St. Paul provide a noteworthy illustration of this” (143). Arnold argues
that nowhere else has Puritanism found its “canons of truth” and a sense
of the “one thing needful” than in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (143). Yet
the Puritans distort and oversimplify Paul’s complex thought, the mystery
of that which he treats:

And who . . . must not feel how terms which St. Paul employs, in trying
to follow with his analysis of such profound power and originality some
of the most delicate, intricate, obscure, and contradictory workings and
states of the human spirit, are detached and employed by Puritanism,
not in the connected and fluid way in which St. Paul employs them,
and for which alone words are really meant, but in an isolated, fixed,
mechanical way, as if they were talismans; and how all trace and sense
of St. Paul’s true movement of ideas, and sustained masterly analysis, is
thus lost? Who, I say, that has watched Puritanism—the force which so
strongly Hebraises, which so strongly takes St. Paul’s writings as some-
thing absolute and final, containing the one thing needful—handle such
terms as grace, faith, election, righteousness, but must feel, not only that
these terms have for the mind of Puritanism a sense false and misleading,
but also that this sense is the most monstrous and grotesque caricature
of the sense of St. Paul, and that his true meaning is by these worship-
pers of his words altogether lost? (143–44)

Here, Arnold critiques Puritanism’s hermeneutics of rational certitude,
epistemological narrowness, and moral simplicity. Instead, to Arnold, the
Bible is obscure, intricate, mysterious, and despite the Puritan claim that
the Bible (or St. Paul) gives the “one thing needful,” the man of culture
knows that “No man, who knows nothing else, knows even his Bible”
(144). The Bible, Arnold implies, is infinitely more complex and uncertain
in meaning than the Puritans admit; full knowledge of the text is always
beyond the reader’s understanding. This very sense of obscurity, incom-
pleteness, and mystery—the incomprehensibility and beauty of the Bible—
is what has been lost for so long in English culture. In this sense, the Bible
for Arnold is like Newman’s novel, a literary text, for it can potentially
show the reader who opens the self the epistemological limits of the self.
For both Newman and Arnold, reading has the potential to help one overcome one’s “Puritan self.” Ironically, however, Newman and Arnold at the same time create and further the stereotype of what Puritanism is. They both seek to dismantle Puritanism in order to find something new—a new social attitude toward Catholics for Newman, a new cultural “best self” to which the English might aspire for Arnold—but they remain dialectically tied to that which they mean to escape. They become the sovereign interpreters and identifiers of English Protestantism even as they critique English Protestantism’s modes of sovereign interpretation. They are thinking from within the dialectic of the novelistic narrative—the dialectic of confinement and escape—a narrative placing a circle of limits on them they are unable to see because it is further out and encompasses more than the limits they are critiquing. In pointing this out, I do not want to belittle the fact that Catholics in England faced horrible oppression for centuries. Obviously, Newman was heroic to speak out against and try to dismantle the ingrained anti-Catholic prejudices. But there has to be some better way to meet the Others who estrange than to estrange and Other them right back.

Obviously, the reality of Puritanism and Protestantism in the Victorian era was far more complex and rich than these stereotypes and theories ever allow, just as were those of the original early modern Puritan cultures. Yet these stereotypes and theories, including ironically the stereotype that the tendency to stereotype is Puritan, persist, not only shaping how modernist writers and artists thought but continuing to shape how we view literary history today.